Poul Anderson: The Lady of the Winds

Fantasy & Science Fiction

OCT/NOV

ALL-STAR 52ND ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

One of Her Paths
Jan Watson

Ray Bradbury

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Gene Wolfe

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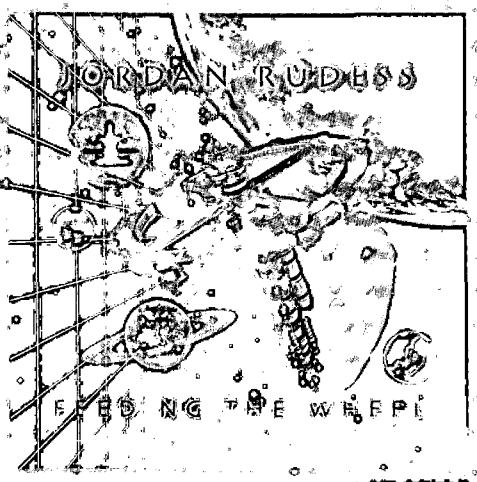

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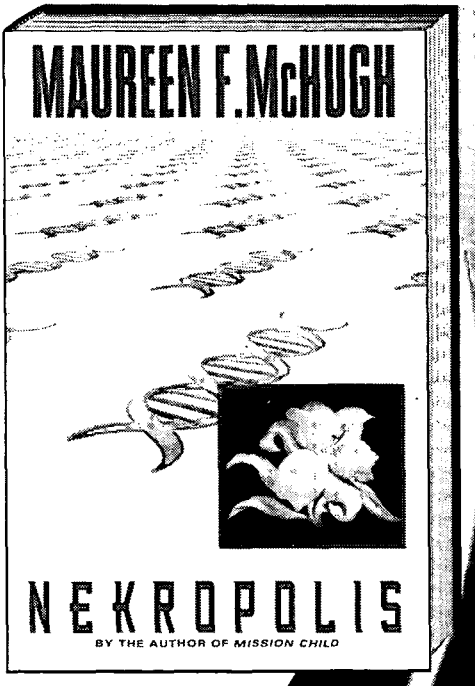

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THE MAGAZINE OF
Fantasy & Science Fiction
October/November • 53rd Year of Publication

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The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction (ISSN 1095-8258), Volume 101, No. 4&5, Whole No. 600, October/November 2001. Published monthly except for a combined October/November issue by Spilogale, Inc. at $3.50 per copy. Annual subscription $38.97; $48.97 outside of the U.S. Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy & Science Fiction, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030. Publication office, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030. Periodical postage paid at Hoboken, NJ 07030, and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A. Copyright © 2001 by Spilogale, Inc. All rights reserved.
Distributed by Curtis Circulation Co., 730 River Rd, New Milford, NJ 07646.
GENERAL AND EDITORIAL OFFICE: PO BOX 3447, HOBOKEN, NJ 07030
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Poul Anderson's first appearance in our pages was in April of 1951—issue number 6 of this magazine, to be precise. In the intervening years, he has penned a book or thirty, the most recent of which is Mother of Kings. *Now here we are at issue number 600 and the master is still spinning out lovely yarns for our entertainment. This new one gives us a bard by the name of Cappen Varra (whom some of you have met before, perhaps in the Thieves' World books edited by Robert Asprin and Lynn Abbey) and one pickle of a predicament.*

The Lady of the Winds

By Poul Anderson

SOUTHWARD THE MOUNTAINS lifted to make a wall across a heaven still hard and blue. Snow whitened their peaks and dappled the slopes below. Even this far under the pass, patches of it lay on sere grass, among strewn boulders — too early in the season, fatally too early. Dry motes blew off in glittery streaks, borne on a wind that whittered and whirled. Its chill searched deep. Westward, clouds were piling up higher than the heights they shrouded, full of darkness and further storm.

A snow devil spun toward Cappen Varra, thickening as it went. Never had he known of the like. Well, he had gone forth to find whatever Power was here. He clutched the little harp with numbed fingers as if it were his courage. The gyre stopped before him and congealed. It became the form of a woman taller than himself. She poised utterly beautiful, but hueless as the snow, save for faint blue shadows along the curves of her and eyes like upland lakes. The long, tossing hair and a thin vortex of ice dust half clothed her nakedness. Somehow she seemed to quiver, a wind that could not ever come altogether to rest.

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"My lady!" broke from him in the tongue of his homeland.

He could have tried to stammer on with words heard in this country, but she answered him likewise, singing more than speaking, maybe whistling more than singing: "What fate do you seek, who dared so to call on me?"

"I — I don't know," he got out, truly enough. "That lies with my lady. Yet it seemed right to bring her what poor gift was mine to offer."

He could not tell whether he heard scorn or a slight, wicked mirth. "A free gift, with nothing to ask in return?"

Cappen drew breath. The keen air seemed to whip up his wits. He had dealt with the mighty often before now — none such as her, no, but whatever hope he had lay with supposing that power makes for a certain way of feeling, be it human or overhuman. He swept his headgear off, holding it against his breast while he bowed very deeply. "Who am I to petition my lady? I can merely join all other men in praising her largesse and mercy, exalting her name forever."

The faintest of smiles touched her lips. "Because of what you brought, I will hear you out." It ceased. Impatience edged her voice. The wind strengthened, the frosty tresses billowed more wildly. "I think I know your wish. I do not think I will grant it. However, speak."

He had meant to depart from Sanctuary, but not so hastily. After some three years in that famous, infamous city, he remembered how much more there was to the wide world. Besides, while he had made friends high in its life, as well as among the low and raffish — with whom he generally felt easier — he had also made enemies of either kind. Whether by arrest on some capital charge or, likelier, by a knife in some nighted alley, one of them might well eventually make an end of him. He had survived three attempts, but the need to stay ever alert grew wearisome when hardly anything remained here that was new to him.

For a time after an adventure into which he fell, rescuing a noble lady from captivity in another universe and, perhaps, this world from the sikkintairs, he indulged in pleasures he could now afford. Sanctuary provided them in rich variety. But his tastes did not run to every conceivable kind, and presently those he enjoyed took on a surprising sameness. "Could it be that the gods of vice, even the gods of luxury, have

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less imagination than the gods of virtue and wholesomeness?" he wondered. The thought appalled.

Yet it wakened a dream that surprised him when he recognized it for what it was. He had been supposing his inborn restlessness and curiosity would send him on toward fresh horizons. Instead, memories welled up, and longing sharpened until it felt like unrequited love. Westward his wish ran, across plains, over mountains, through great forests and tumultuous kingdoms, the whole way home to Caronne. He remembered not only gleaming walls, soaring spires, bustling marts and streets; not only broad estates, greensward and greenwood, flowerbeds ablaze, lively men and livelier women; he harked back to the common folk, his folk, their speech and songs and ways. A peasant girl or tavern wench could be as fair as any highborn maiden, and often more fun. He remembered seaports, odors of tar and fish and cargo bales, masts and spars raking the sky, and beyond them the water a-glitter beneath a Southern sun, vast and blue where it reached outward and became Ocean.

Enough remained of his share of Molin Torchholder's reward for the exploit. He need not return as a footloose, hand-to-mouth minstrel, showman, gambler, and whatever-else, the disinherited and rather disgraced younger son of a petty baron. No, if he could get shrewd advice about investments — he knew himself for a much better versifier than money manager — he would become a merchant prince in Croy or Seilles at the very least. Or so he trusted.

Summer was dying away into autumn. The last trader caravans of the year would soon be gone. One was bound as far as Arinberg. That was a goodly distance, well beyond the western border of this Empire, and the town said to be an enjoyable place to spend a winter. Cappen bought two horses, camp gear, and supplies from the master. The traders were still trading here, and did not plan to proceed for another week. Cappen had the interval idle on his hands.

And so it came about that he perforce left Sanctuary earlier than intended.

Candlelight glowed over velvet. Fragrances of incense, of Peridis's warmth and disheveled midnight locks, of lovemaking lately come to a pause, mingled with the sweet notes of a gold-and-diamond songbird

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crafted by some cunning artificer. No noise or chill or stench from the streets outside won through windows barred, glazed, and curtained. Nerigo, third priest of Ils, housed his newest leman well.

Perhaps if he visited her oftener she would not have heeded the blandishments of a young man who encountered her in the gaudy chaos of Midyear Fair and made occasions to pursue the acquaintance. At least, they might have lacked opportunity. But although Nerigo was not without vigor, much of it went in the pursuit of arcane knowledge, which included practices both spiritually and physically demanding. Today he had indicated to Peridis, as often before, that he would be engaged with dark and dangerous powers until dawn, and then must needs sleep in his own house; thereafter, duties at the temple would keep him busy for an indefinite span.

So she sent a note to Cappen Varra at the inn where he lodged. It went by public messenger. As she had made usual, her few servants retired to a dormitory shed behind the house when she had supped. If she needed any, she could ring a bell. Besides, like servants generally in Sanctuary, these cultivated a selective blindness and deafness.

After all, she must shortly bid her lover farewell. It would probably take a while to find another. She might never find another so satisfactory.

"You have asked about some things here," she murmured. "I never dared show you them. Not that you would have betrayed me, but what you didn't know couldn't be gotten out of you, were he to become suspicious. Now, though, when, alas, you are leaving for aye — " She sighed, fluttered her eyelashes, and cast him a wistful smile. "It will take my mind off that, while we rest before our next hour of delight."

"The wait will not be long, since it's you I'm waiting for," he purred.

"Ah, but, my dear, I am less accustomed than I...was...before that man persuaded me hither." With gold, Cappen knew, and the luxury everywhere around, and, he gathered, occasional tales and glimpses of marvels. "Let me rest an hour, to be the readier for you. Meanwhile, there are other, more rare entertainments."

A long silken shift rippled and shimmered as she undulated over to a cabinet of ebony inlaid with ivory in enigmatic patterns. Her single, curious modesty was not to be unclad unless in bath or bed. Having nothing else along, Cappen gratified it by resuming blouse and breeks,

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even his soft shoes. When she opened the cabinet, he saw shelves filled with objects. Most he couldn't at once identify, but books were among them, scrolls and codices. She paused, considering, then smiled again and took out a small, slim volume bound in paper, one of perhaps a dozen. "These amuse me," she said. "Let me in turn beguile you. Come, sit beside me."

He was somewhat smugly aware of how her gaze followed him as he joined her on the sofa. Speech and manner counted most with women, but good looks helped. He was of medium size, slim, lithe and muscular because hitherto he had seldom been able to lead the indolent life he would have preferred. Black hair, banged over the brow and above the shoulders, framed straight-cut features and vividly blue eyes. It also helped to have quite a musical voice.

She handed him the book. He beheld letters totally unfamiliar, laid it on his lap, and opened it. She reached to turn the pages, one by one.

Plain text mingled with lines that must be verse — songs, because it seemed the opening parts were under staves of what he guessed was a musical notation equally strange. There were pictures too, showing people outlandishly clad, drawn with an antic humor that tickled his fancy. "What is this?" he wondered.

"The script for a rollicking comedic performance," she answered.

"When done? Where? How do you know?"

"Well, now, that is a story of its own," she said, savoring his attention. He knew she was not stupid, and wanted to be more to him than simply another female body. Indeed, that was among her attractions. "See you, Nerigo's wizardly questings go into different worlds from ours, alike in some ways, alien in more. Different universes, he says, coexistent with this one on many planes, as the leaves of this tome lie side by side. But I can't really understand his meaning there. Can you?"

Cappen frowned, abruptly uneasy. "Much too well," he muttered.

"What's wrong? I feel you go taut."

"Oh, nothing, really." Cappen made himself relax. He didn't care to speak of the business, if only because that would spoil the mood here. It was, after all, safely behind him, the gate destroyed, the sikkintairs confined to their own skies.

And yet, raced through his mind, that gate had been in the temple of

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Ils, where the high flamen made nefarious use of it. He had heard that, subsequently, the priests of the cult disavowed and severely discouraged such lore. They could have found themselves endangered. Yet search through the temple archives might well turn up further information. Yes, that would explain why Nerigo was secretive, and stored his gains in this house, where nobody would likely think to search.

"He only lusts for knowledge," Peridis reassured. Her tone implied she wished that were not his primary lust. "He does not venture into the Beyond. He simply opens windows for short whiles, observes, and, when he can, reaches through to snatch small things for later study. Is that so terrible? But the hierarchy would make trouble for him if they knew, and...it might strike at me as well."

She brightened. "He shares with me, a little. I have looked with him into his mirror that is not a mirror, at things of glamor or mirth. I have seen this very work performed on a stage far elsewhere, and a few more akin to it. True, the language was foreign to both of us, but he could discern that the story, for instance, concerns a love intrigue. It was partly at my wish that he hunted about until he found a shop where the books are sold, and cast spells to draw copies into his arcanum. Since then I've often taken them out when I'm alone, to call back memories of the pleasure. Now let me explain and share it with you as well as I'm able." Heavy-lidded, her glance smoldered on him. "It does tell of lovers who at last come together."

He thrust his qualms aside. The thing was in fact fascinating. They began to go through it page by page, her finger tracing out each illustration while she tried to convey what understanding she had of it. His free arm slid behind her.

A thud sounded from the vestibule. Hinges whined. A chill gust bore smells of the street in. Peridis screamed. Cappen knew stabbingly that the bolt on the main door had flung back at the command of its master. The book fell from their hands and they read no more that night.

A lean, grizzle-bearded, squinting man, clad in a silvery robe, entered. At his back hulked another, red-skinned, seven feet tall, so broad and thick as to seem squat, armed with steel cap, leather cuirass, and unfairly large scimitar. Cappen did not need Peridis's gasp to inform him that they were Nerigo and a Makali bodyguard.

The woman sprang to her feet. As the bard did, the little volume slid

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off his lap. Almost without thinking, he snatched it and tucked it down his half-open blouse. A bargaining counter — ?

For an endless instant, silence held them all.

When Nerigo then spoke, it was quite softly, even impersonally. "I somewhat hoped I would prove mistaken. But you realize, Peridis, I cannot afford blind trust in anyone. A sortilege indicated you were receiving a visitor in my absences."

She stepped back, lifting her hands, helpless and imploring. Nerigo shook his head. Did ruefulness tinge his words? "Oh, fear not, my cuddly. From the beginning, I knew you for what you are. It's not rational to wax angry when a cat steals cream or a monkey disarrays documents. One simply makes provision against further untowardness. Why should I deny myself the pleasure that is you? No, you will merely be careful in future, very careful. If you are, then when I want novelty you shall go your way freely, unharmed, with only a minor spell on you to lock your lips against ever letting slip anything about me or my doings."

Cappen heard how she caught her breath and broke into sobs. At the back of his mind, he felt a burden drop off himself. He would have hated being the instrument of harm to her. Not that she had been much more to him than frolic; yet a man wishes well-being for his friends. Besides, killing beautiful young women was a terrible waste.

Hope flickered up amidst his dismay. He bowed low. "My lord, most reverend sir," he began, "your magnanimity surpasses belief. No, say rather that it demonstrates, in actual incarnation, the divine benevolence of those gods in whose service you so distinguish yourself. Unworthy though I be, my own humble but overwhelming gratitude — "

Nerigo cut him off. "You need not exercise that flattering tongue which has become notorious throughout Sanctuary," the sorcerer-priest said, now coldly impersonal. "You are no wayward pet of mine, you are a brazen intruder. I cannot possibly let you go unpunished; my demons would lose all respect for me. Furthermore, this is an opportunity first to extract from you everything you know. I think especially about the eminent Molin Torchholder and his temple of Savankala, but doubtless other bits of information can prove useful too. Take him, Yaman."

"No, no, I beg you!" Peridis shrieked, but scrambled aside as the giant advanced.

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If he was hustled off to a crypt, Cappen knew, he would welcome death when at last it came. He retreated, drawing the knife at his belt. Yaman grinned. The scimitar hissed forth. "Take him alive," Nerigo called, "but I've ways to stanch wounds once he's disabled."

Cappen was no bravo or brawler. Wits were always his weapon of choice. However, sometimes he had not been granted the choice. Thus he went prepared. His knife was not just the article of clothing and minor tool commonly carried by men. It was razor-honed, as balanced as a hawk on the wing. When in his wanderings he earned some coins by a show of prestidigitation, it had often figured in the act.

He poised, took aim, and threw.

A hoarse, gurgling bellow broke from Yaman. He lurched, dropped his weapon, and went to his knees. Blood spurted. The blade had gone into his throat below the chin. If Nerigo wanted to keep his henchman, he'd be busy for a while. Mainly, Cappen's way out was clear. He blew Peridis a kiss and darted off.

A yell pursued him. "You'll not escape, Varra! I'll have you hounded to the ends of the Empire. If they're Imperial troopers who find you, they'll have orders to cut you down on sight. But first demons will be on your trail — "

By then he was in the vestibule, retrieving his rapier and cloak, whence he slipped forth into the street. Walls and roofs loomed black along its narrowness. A strip of stars between barely gave light to grope by. Oh, lovely gloom! He kept to one side, where the dark was thickest and there was less muck to step in, and fled as deftly as a thief.

What to do? tumbled through his head. The inconspicuous silver amulet hanging on his breast ought to baffle Nerigo's afreets or whatever they were. It protected him against any supernatural forces of less than divine status. At least, so the wizard who gave it to him years ago had said, and so it had seemed to work on two or three occasions since. Of course, that might have been happenstance and the wizard a liar, but he had plenty of worries without adding hypothetical ones.

Equally of course, if such a being did come upon him, it could seize him or tear him apart. Physical strength was a physical quality. Likewise for human hunters.

Yes, Nerigo would have those out after him, while messengers sped

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north, south, east, and west bearing his description to castles, cantonments, garrisons, and watchposts. Once he had aroused the indignation of his colleagues, Nerigo would have ample influence to get such an order issued. Cappen's connections to Molin were too slight — how he wished now that he hadn't thought it best to play down his role in that rescue — for the high priest of Savankala to give him asylum and safeguard across the border. Relations between the temples were strained enough already.

The westbound caravan wouldn't leave for days. Well before then, Nerigo would learn that Cappen had engaged a place in it. There were several others, readying to go in their various directions. He could find temporary refuge and get information in one of the disreputable inns he knew. With luck, he could slink to the master of whichever was departing first, give him a false name and a plausible story, and be off with it — maybe even tomorrow.

That would cost, especially if a bit of a bribe proved advisable. Cappen had deposited his money with a reliable usurer, making withdrawals as desired. Suddenly it might as well be on the Moon. He was back to what lay in his pouch. It might barely stretch to getting him away.

He suppressed a groan and shrugged. If his most recent memories were dearly bought, still, they'd be something to enjoy on an otherwise dismal journey.

IT WAS A LONG annual trek that Deghred im Dalagh and his followers made. Northward they fared from Temanhassa in Arechoum, laden with spices, aromatics, intoxicant herbs, pearls, rich fabrics, cunningly wrought metal things, and the like, the merchants and hucksters among them trading as they went. The route zigzagged through desert and sown, village and town, across dunes and rivers, by highroad and cairn-marked trail, over the Uryuk Ubur and thence the cultivated plains of the Empire, Sanctuary its terminus. That city produced little other than crime and politics, often indistinguishable, but goods of every kind flowed to its marts and profitable exchanges could be made. The return journey was faster, as direct as possible, to get beyond the mountains before their early winter closed the passes.

Well, Cappen consoled himself, this was not the destination he had

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had in mind, but needs must, he had never yet seen yonder exotic lands, and maybe he could improve his luck there.

It could stand improvement, his thoughts continued. Instead of the comforts he paid for and forfeited, he had a single scrawny mule, which he must frequently relieve by turning to shank's mare; a greasy third-hand bedroll; two similar changes of clothes and a towel; ill-fitting boots; a cheap knife, spoon, and tin bowl; and leave to eat with the choreboys, not the drovers.

However, he remained alive and at large. That was ample cause for cheerfulness, most of the time. Making friends came naturally to him. Before long his tales, japes, and songs generated a liveliness that drew the attention of the merchants. Not long after that, they invited him into their mess. Deghred gave him a decent kaftan to wear while they ate, drank, and talked; everybody concerned was fluent in the Ilsig language, as well as others. "I think you have possibilities, lad," the caravan master said. "I'll lodge you for a while after we come to Temanhassa and introduce you to certain people." He waved his hand. "No, no, not alms. A modest venture, which in the course of time may bring me a modest profit."

Cappen knew he had better not seem a daydreamer or a fool. "The tongue of Arechoum is foreign to me, sir. Your men can scarcely teach me along the way."

"You're quick to pick things up, I've seen. Until you do, belike I can help."

Cappen understood from the drawl and the bearded smile that Deghred meant also to profit from that help, perhaps considerably. Not that he was ever unnecessarily unkind or hostile. Cappen rather liked him. But business was business. At the moment, nothing better was in sight.

Beasts and men plodded on. The land rose in bleakening hills. Now and then, when by himself, Cappen took from his meager baggage the book he had borne from Peridis's house and paged through it, puzzling over the text and staves, smiling at the pictures, mainly recalling her and their nights. Thence he harked back to earlier recollections and forward to speculations about the future. It bore him away from the trek.

At a lonely fortress on a stony ridge, the commander routinely let them cross the frontier. Cappen drew a long breath. Yet, he realized, that

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frontier was ill-defined, and Nerigo's agents might still find him. He would not feel altogether safe until he was on the far side of the Uryuk Ubur.

Those mountains reared like a horse. Mile by mile the trails grew more toilsome, the land more cold and stark. Unseasonably so, Deghred said, and burned some incense to his little private gods. Nevertheless the winds lashed, yelled, and bit, clouds raced ragged, snow flurried.

Thus they came to the hamlet Khangaii and heard that if they went ahead, they would almost surely die.

A storm roared about the huts. Sleet hissed on the blast. Moss-chinked stone walls and turf roof muffled the noise, a dung fire and crowded bodies kept the dwelling of headman Bulak odorously warm, but somehow that sharpened the feeling of being trapped.

"Aiala is angry," he said. "We have prayed, we have sacrificed a prime ewe — not in feast, but casting it into a crevasse of Numurga Glacier — yet she rages ever worse."

"Nor has she sent me a dream to tell why, though I ate well-nigh all the sacred *ulaku* left us and lay swooned through two sunrises." His elder wife, who was by way of being the tribal priestess, shuddered. "Instead, nightmares full of furious screams."

Flames flickered low on the hearth and guttered in clay lamps. Smoke dimmed what light they gave and blurred uneasy shadows. From the gloom beyond gleamed the frightened stares of Bulak's younger wife and children, huddled on the sheepskins that covered the sleeping dais. Three favored dogs gnawed mutton bones tossed them after the company had eaten. Several men and the senior woman sat cross-legged around the fire, drinking fermented milk from cow horns refilled out of a jug. They were as many as could well have been crowded in, Deghred and such of the merchants as he picked. The rest of the travelers were housed elsewhere. Even in this bad time, hospitality was sacred. Cappen had persuaded the caravan master that he, come from afar, might conceivably have some new insight to offer.

He was beginning to regret the mix of cockiness and curiosity that led him to do so. He had more or less gotten to ignoring the stench, but his eyes stung and he kept choking back the coughs that would have been impolite.

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Not that things were likely any better in any other hut. Well, maybe he could have slept. It was a strain trying to follow the talk. Bulak knew some Ilsig, and some of the guests had a smattering of his language. Between stumbling pidgin and awkward translations, conversation did not exactly flow.

At least, though, the slowness and the pauses gave him a chance to infer what he could not directly follow, correcting his mistakes when context revealed them to him. It became almost as if he listened to ordinary speech. He wasn't sure whether or not the drink helped, if only by dulling his discomfort. Foul stuff, but by now his palate was as stunned as his nose and he readily accepted recharges.

"Have you not gods to appeal to other than this — this Aiala?" asked the merchant Haran im Zeyin.

Deghred frowned at the brashness and shook his head. The wife caught her breath and drew a sign which smoke-swirls traced. Bulak took it stolidly. "She rules the air over the Uryuk Ubur," he answered. Light wavered across the broad, seamed face, almond eyes, and thin beard. "What shall they of the Fire, the Earth, and the Water do?"

"It may be she is even at odds with them, somehow, and this is what keeps her wrathful," whispered the woman. "There is a song among the olden songs that tells of such a time, long ago, when most of the High Folk died before she grew mild again — but I must not sing any of those songs here."

"So it could worsen things to call on them," said Deghred with careful gravity. "Yet — may she and you bear with an ignorant outsider who wishes only to understand — why should she make you suffer? Surely you are blameless."

Bulak half shrugged. "How else shall she vent her anger than in tempest and chill?".

Irreverence grinned within Cappen. He remembered infuriated women who threw things. The grin died. Men were apt to do worse when beside themselves, and be harder to bring to reason. More to the point, he happened to be on the receiving end.

The headman's stoicism gave way for a moment. "I have had my day. Our tribe will live through the winter — enough of us — I think — and may hope that then she has calmed — "

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"For she is not cruel," the priestess said as if chanting. "Her snows melt beneath her springtime breezes and fill the streams, while the pastures turn green and starry with tiny flowers and lambs frisk in the sunshine. She brings the fullness of summer, the garnered riches of autumn, and when her snows have returned we have been snug and gladsome."

Isn't that the sort of thing a goddess or god is supposed to do? thought Cappen.

"—but how many of our young will freeze or starve, how many of our littlest ones?" croaked Bulak. He stiffened his lips. "We must wait and see."

And, Cappen reflected, *few gods are noted for tender solicitude. In fact, they often have nasty tempers.*

If this is even a goddess, properly speaking. Maybe she ranks only as a sylph or something, though with considerable local power. That could make matters even worse. Minor functionaries are notoriously touchy.

Supposing, of course, there is anything in what I've been hearing.

Deghred said it for him: "Again I pray pardon. No impertinence is meant. But is it not possible that what we have met is merely a freak, a flaw in the weather, nothing for the Lady Aiala to take heed of, and very soon, perhaps already tomorrow, it will go back to what it should be?"

Bulak shook his head. "Never in living memory have we suffered aught like this so early: as well you should know, who have passed through here, to and fro, for year after year. But there is the sacred song.... Push on if you will. The higher you go, the harder it will be. Unless we get respite within the next three or four days, I tell you that you will find the passes choked with snow and yourselves in a blizzard, unable even to go back. If afterward your bodies are found, we will make an offering for your souls." His smile held scant mirth. "Not that I'm at all sure 'we' means anyone here tonight."

"What, then, do you counsel we should do?"

"Why, retreat while still you are able. Tomorrow, I'd say. We cannot keep you through such a winter as is upon us. Barely will we be able to keep ourselves—some of ourselves. Go back north into the lowlands and wait. Could we High Folk do likewise, we might well, but if naught else, the Empire would seize on the chance to make us impoverished clients. We

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have had dealings with it erenow. Better that a remnant of us stay free. You, though, need but wait the evil out."

"At cutthroat cost," muttered Haran.

"Better to lose our gains than our lives," retorted Deghred. His tone gentled. "And yet, Bulak, we are old friends, you and I. A man should not turn his back on a friend. Might we, your guests, be able to do something? Maybe, even, as foreigners, give reverence and some unique sacrifice to the Lady, and thus please her — ?" His voice trailed off.

"How shall we speak to her? In our broken Uryuk?" wondered another merchant. "Would that not be an insult?"

"She is of the winds," said Bulak. "She and her kind ken every tongue in the world, for the winds hear and carry the knowledge to each other." He turned to his elder wife. "Is that not so?" She nodded.

Deghred brightened. "Then she will understand us when we pray and make offerings."

The priestess pinched her lips together above the few teeth left her. "Why should she heed you, who are outlanders, lowlanders, have never before done her homage, and clearly are now appealing only to save — not even your lives, for you can still escape, but your mongers' profits?"

"Treasure? We have jewelry of gold, silver, and gemstones, we have garments fit for queens — "

"What are such things to Air?"

"To Earth, maybe," Bulak put in. "Aromatic woods might please Fire, spices and sweetmeats Water. Yet with them, too, I fear you would be unwise." Shrewdly: "For in no case will you offer your entire freight, when you can better withdraw and come back with most of it several months hence. It is...not well to try to bargain with the Powers."

That depended on which Powers, Cappen thought. He knew of some — But they were elsewhere, gods and tutelaries of lands less stark than this.

The drink was buzzing in his head. Dismay shocked through. *Why am I jesting? It's my life on the table tonight!*

Slowly, Deghred nodded. The one sensible thing for his caravan to do was retreat, wait out the winter, and cut its losses as much as might be. Wasn't it?

And absolute lunacy for Cappen Varra. Once he was back in the Empire, he himself would not bet a counterfeit lead bawbee on his chance

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of getting away again. The alert was out for him. If nobody else noticed first, one or another of his fellow travelers was bound soon to hear the description and betray him for the reward. Fleeing into the hinterlands or diving into some thieves' den would hardly buy enough time. Though his amulet might keep Nerigo's demons off his direct track, they could invisibly watch and listen to others, everywhere, and report everything suspicious to the sorcerer.

Stay here in Khangaii? Surely the villagers could feed one extra mouth. He'd pay them well, with arts and shows, entertainments such as they'd never enjoyed before, keeping heart in them through the grim time ahead.

Maybe they'd agree. Then maybe he'd starve or freeze to death along with so many of them. Or maybe Nerigo would get word of a vagabond who'd joined the men of Arechoum and stayed behind when they returned. He was not yet too far beyond the Imperial marches for a squad to come after him as soon as the ways became at all passable.

Deghred barked a harsh laugh. "Yes, most certainly not to dicker and quibble with a female already incensed," he said. "That would be to throw oil on a fire." He sighed. "Very well, we'll load up again tomorrow and betake ourselves hence. May we find it well with the High Folk when we come back."

The younger wife moaned softly in the shadows and clutched two of the children to her.

Let her live, Cappen thought wildly. *She's beautiful. Several of them that I've spied here are, in their way. Though I don't suppose I can beguile any —*

His heart leaped. His legs followed. The others stared as he sprang to his feet. "No, wait!" he cried. "Wait only a little span. A few days more at most. I've an idea to save us!"

"What, you?" demanded Deghred, while his traders gaped and Bulak scowled. "Has a *yawanna* taken your wits? Or have you not understood what we were saying, how easily we can give the Lady offense and bring her fury straight against us?"

"I have, I have," Cappen answered frantically. "My thought is nothing like that. Any risk will be wholly my own, I swear. Only hearken to me."

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Risk indeed. A notion born out of half-drunken desperation, maybe. But maybe, also, sired by experience.

He called up coolness, to be a wellspring for a spate of eager, cozening words such as a bard and showman had better always be able to produce.

DAY CAME BLEAK and bright. Washed clean, newly smooth-shaven, wearing the finest warm raiment to be found in the caravan's goods — plumed cap of purple satin, scarlet cloak, green tunic embroidered with gold and trimmed with sable, dark-blue hose, buskins of tooled leather — with a small harp in his hand from the same source, he left the village behind and made his way on up the path toward the heights. Wind whistled. Far overhead, a hawk rode it. The chill whipped his face. He hardly felt it, nor any weariness after sleepless hours. He was strung too taut.

But when he reached the cairn they had told him of, from which rose a pole and flew an often-renewed white banner, while a narrow trail wound off to the left, an abrupt sense of how alone he was hollowed him out. Though he seldom thought about it, his wish was to die, sometime in the distant future, with a comrade or two and a girl or three to appreciate his gallantry and his last quip.

He stiffened his sinews and summoned up his blood. He must not seem to be afraid, so best was to convince himself that he wasn't. Think rather of this as a unique challenge.

The trail went across the mountainside, near the edge of a cliff sheering down into dizzy depths. Elsewhere the land reached vast and tilted, here and there a meadow amidst the rock. A waterfall gleamed like a sword across the gorge. Its booming came faintly through the wind.

Before long he reached the altar where they prayed and sacrificed to Aiala, a great boulder squared off and graven with eroded symbols. Cappen saw few if any other traces of man. No sacred smoke, but thin gust-borne streamers of dry snow blew past. Here, though, if anywhere, she should quickly discern any worshipper.

He took stance before the block and turned his gaze aloft. Give her a short time to see, perhaps to wonder, perhaps even to admire.

The air shrilled.

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Cappen tucked gloves into belt and positioned the harp. His fingers evoked the first chord. He began to sing.

It was a song he had used more than once over the years, usually to good effect. Of course, it must be adapted to each occasion, even rendered into a different language, and he had lain awake working on it. However, if she really did know all human tongues, he could simplify the task by staying with the original Caronnais. If not, or if he was mistaken about her femaleness — He wouldn't weaken his delivery by fretting about that. He sang loud and clear:

"Be merciful, I pray, and hear my cry
Into the winds that you command. I know
That I am overbold, but even so
Adore the one whose queendom is the sky,
In awe of whom the moonlit night-clouds fly,
Who dances in the sunlight and the snow,
Who brings the springtime, when the freshets flow
And all the world goes green beneath her eye.
Yet worship is not that which makes me call
Upon you here, and offer up my heart.
Although I, mortal, surely cannot woo
As man to maiden, still, I have seen all —
No, just a little, but at least a part —
Of that alive enchantment which is you."

And she came to him.

" — However, speak," she said.

He suppressed a shiver. Now he must be as glib as ever in his life. "First, will my lady permit that I resume my cap and gloves and pull my cloak around me? It's mortal cold for a mortal."

Again something like amusement flickered briefly. She nodded. "Then say what is your name, your home, and your errand."

"May it please my lady, the caravaneers I travel with know me as Peor Sardan of Lorace." He was clearly from such parts. "But you of the high heavens surely recognize that this cannot be quite so." *Really? Well, anyhow, outright prevarication could be hazardous and should be unnecessary. She won't deign to give me away. If she chooses to destroy me,*

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she'll do it herself. Battered to death by hailstones — ? "My motherland is farther west and south, the kingdom of Caronne, and I hight Cappen Varra, born to the noble house of Dordain. As for my errand, I have none fixed, being a wanderer — in spite of the birth I mentioned — who wishes to see something of the world and better his fortune before turning home. Rather, that was my only wish until this happy day."

"Yes, I've spied the pack train," said Aiala scornfully. "You hope I'll grant you better weather."

"Oh, my lady! Forgive me, but no. Who am I to petition you? Nor am I in their enterprise. I simply took what appeared to be an opportunity to visit their country, of which go many fabulous accounts. Now I see this for the velleity it was." He made his look upon her half shy, half aglow. "Here I find the fulfillment of my true and lifelong desire."

Was she taken a bit aback? At any rate, her manner grew less forbidding. "What do you mean?"

Cappen gestured from beneath his cloak. "Why, my lady, what else than the praise of Woman? She, the flower of earthly creation, in her thousandfold dear incarnations, no wine so sweet or heady as her presence, she is the meaning of my existence and my poor verses in her honor are its justification. Yes, I have found her and sung to her in many a land, from the soft vales of Caronne to the stern fjords of Norren, from a fisher hut on Ocean shore to a palace in Sanctuary, and my thought was to seek her anew in yonder realm, perhaps some innocent maiden, perhaps some wise enchantress, how can I know before she has kindled my heart?"

"You are...a flighty one, then." She did not sound disapproving — what constancy has the wind? — but as though intrigued, even puzzled.

"Also, my very love drives me onward. For see you, my lady, it is Woman herself for whom I quest. While often wondrous, no one woman is more than mortal. She has, at most, a few aspects of perfection, and they changeable as sun-sparkles on the river that is time. Otherwise, the flaws of flesh, the infirmities of insight, the narrowness of dailiness belong to being human. And I, all too human, lack strength and patience to endure such thwarting of the dream for long. The yearning overtakes me and I must be off again in search of that prize which common sense tells me is unattainable but the spirit will not ever quite let me despair of."

Not bad, Cappen thought. By now he half believed it.

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"I told you to speak in few words." Aiala didn't say that quite firmly.

"Ah, would that I could give you obedience in this as I shall in all else whatsoever," Cappen sighed into the wind. "Dismiss me, and of course I will depart, grieving and yet gladsome over what has been vouchsafed me. But until then I can no more curb my tongue than I can quell my heart. For I have glimpsed the gates of my goal, loftier and more precious than any knight before me can have beheld, and I jubilate."

"And never before have I — " escaped from her. She recalled her savage dignity. "Clarify this. I'll not stand here the whole day."

"Certainly not. The heights and the heavens await your coming. But since you command me, I can relate quite plainly that, hitherbound, I heard tell of my lady. Beyond, perhaps over and above her majesty and mightiness, the tales were of visions, dazzlements, seen by an incredibly fortunate few through the centuries, beauty well-nigh too great to bear — and, more than that, a spirit lordly and loving, terrible and tender, mysterious and merry, life-bearing and life-nourishing — in short, Woman."

"You...had not seen me...earlier," Aiala murmured.

"But I had, fleetingly, fragmentarily, in dreams and longings. Here, I thought, must be Truth. For although there are doubtless other goddesses of whom something similar can be said, and I imply no least disrespect for any, still, Truth is One, is it not? Thus I strove to infer a little of the immortally living miracle I heard of. I wove these inferences into a humble tribute. I brought it to your halidom as my offering.

"To do worship is an end and a reward in itself. I dared hope for no more. Now — my lady, I have seen that, however inadequate, my verse was not altogether wide of the mark. What better can an artist win than such a knowledge, for an hour of his few years on Earth? My lady, I can die content, and I thank you."

"You — need not die. Not soon. Go back to the plains."

"So we had decided, the caravaneers and I, for never would we defy our lady's righteous wrath. Thence I will seek to regain my faraway birthland, that my countrymen too may be enriched by a hint of your glory. If I fall by the wayside — " Cappen shrugged. "Well, as I said, today my life has had overflowing measure."

She raised her brows. "Your road is dangerous?"

"It is long, my lady, and at the outset — I left certain difficulties

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behind me in the Empire — trivial, but some people overreact. My plan had been to circumvent them by going roundabout through Arechoum. No matter. If the cosmic cycle requires that my lady decree an early winter throughout her mountains, I shall nevertheless praise her while blood beats within me."

"It's not that." Aiala bridled. The wind snarled. "No! I am not bound to a wheel! This is my will."

"Your wisdom."

"My anger!" she yelled. The storm in the west mounted swiftly higher. "I'll show them! They'll be sorry!"

"They?" asked Cappen low.

"Aye, they'll mourn for that they mocked me, when the waters of Vanis lie frozen past the turning of the springtime, and the earth of Orun remains barren, and the fires of Lua smolder out because no dwellers are left alive to tend them." Under his cloak, Cappen supressed a shudder. *Yes,* he thought, *human rulers don't take their subjects much into account either.* "Then they'll come to me begging my mercy, and I will grant it to them for a song."

I'm on the track. "But is it not my lady of the winds who sings to the world?" Cappen pursued, carefully, carefully.

"So they'll discover, when I laugh at their effort."

"I am bewildered. How could any being, divine or not, possibly quarrel with my lady?"

Aiala paced to and fro. The wind strengthened, the dark clouds drew closer. After a stark minute she halted, looked straight at him, and said, "The gods fall out with each other now and then." He forebore to mention that he well knew that. His need was for her to unburden herself. His notion that she was lonelier than she realized seemed the more likely when her tone calmed somewhat. "This — " She actually hesitated. "You may understand. You are a maker of songs."

"I am when inspired, my lady, as I was today." Or whenever called for, but that was beside the immediate point.

"You did well. Not that *they* could have appreciated it."

"A song was wanted among the gods?"

Locks streamed and tumbled the more wildly as she nodded. "For a wedding, a divine marriage. Your countrymen must perceive it otherwise,

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but in these uplands it is Khaiantai who wakens at the winter solstice from her sleep, a virgin, to welcome Hurultan the Lightbearer, her bridegroom; and great is the rejoicing in Heaven and on Earth."

On Earth in better years, Cappen thought. *Yes, the mythic event, forever new and forever recurrent.* A chill passed up his spine. He concealed it as best he was able. "But...the occasion is not always the same?"

"No. Is one day the same as the last? Time would come to a stop."

"So — the feast and — " his mind leaped — "gifts to the happy pair?"

"Just so. Of us Four, Orun may bring fruits or gold, Vanis a fountain or a rainbow, Lua an undying lamp or a victorious sword — such things as pertain to them — while I have given an eagle or a fragrance or — We go there together; for we are the Four."

"But now lately — ?"

Her reasonableness began to break. "I had in mind a hymeneal song, like none heard before in those halls but often to be again. They agreed this would be a splendid gift. I created it. And then — " Elemental rage screamed through an icy blast.

"And they did not comprehend it," Cappen proposed.

"They scoffed! They said it was so unworthy they would not come to the feast in my company if I brought it. They *dare!*"

Cappen waited out the ensuing whirlwind. When Aiala had quieted down a grim trifle, he ventured, "My lady, this is often the fate of artists. I have learned how eloquence is meaningless to the word-blind, music and meter to the tone-deaf, subtlety to the blunt-brained, and profundity to the unlearned."

"Good names for these, Cappen Varra."

"I refer to no gods or other high Powers, my lady," he made haste to reply. One never knew who or what might be listening. "No irreverence. Absolutely never! I speak merely of my small human experience and of people whom I actually pity more than despise — except, to be sure, when they set themselves up as critics. Yet even persons of unimpeachable taste and discernment can have differences of opinion. This is an unfortunate fact of life, to which I have become resigned."

"I will not be. Moreover, word has gotten about. If I come lamely in with something else than a song — No!" Aiala yowled. "They'll learn

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respect when I avenge my pride with disasters like none since Chaos rebelled in the beginning."

"Ah — may that perhaps conceivably be just a minim extreme, my lady? Not that I can judge. Indeed, I am baffled to grasp how your colleagues could reject your epithalamium. The music of the wind pervades the world, lulling breeze, sough in forests, laughterful rainsquall, trumpeting gale, oh, infinite is its variety, and its very hushes are a part of the composition," said Cappen with another sweeping gesture.

She nearly thawed. "You, though, you understand me — " she breathed. "For the first time ever, someone — "

He intended to go on in this vein until he had softened her mood enough for her to stop punishing the land. But she paused, then exclaimed, "Hear what I have made, and judge."

"Oh, my lady, I cannot!" gasped Cappen, aghast. "I'm totally unworthy, unfit, disqualified."

She smiled. "Be not afraid," she said quite gently. "Only tell me what you think. I won't take offense."

Too many others had insisted on declaiming their verses to him. "But, my lady, I don't know, I cannot know the language of the gods, and surely your work would lose much in translation."

"Actually," she said, "it's in classical Xandran, as we're wont to use when elegance is the aim."

He remembered white temples and exquisite sculptures in the South and West, too often ruinous, yet still an ideal for all successor peoples. Evidently the local deities felt that, while their worshippers might be barbarians, they themselves ought to display refinement. "But I also fear — I regret — my lady, I was not very dedicated to my schooling. My knowledge of Xandran was slight at best, and has largely rusted out of me." True enough.

Impulsive as her winds, she smiled afresh. "You shall have it back, and more."

"That would, er, take a while."

"No. Hear me. All tongues spoken by men anywhere are open to me."

Yes, so Bulak had said. How remote and unreal the Uryuk hut felt.

"For the sake of your courteous words, Cappen Varra, and your doubtless keen judgment, I will bestow this on you."

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He gaped. "How — how — And how can this weak little head of mine hold so overwhelmingly much?"

"It need not. Whenever you hear or read a language, you will be able to use it like a native. Afterward and until next time, there will be only whatever you choose to keep and can, as with ordinary memories."

"My lady, I repeat, I'm wholly unworthy — "

"Hold still." Imperious, she trod over to him, laid hands on his cheeks, and kissed him.

He lurched, half stunned. A forefinger slid into either ear. He noted vaguely amidst the tempest that this was a caress worth trying in future, if he had a future.

She released him and stepped back. His daze faded and he could pay close heed to what he said. "I, I never dreamed that Woman herself would — For that instant I was like unto a god."

Her hand chopped the air, impatient. "Now you are ready to hear me."

He braced for it.

Gaze expectant upon him, she cleared her throat and launched into her song. Fantastically, the Xandran lyrics rang Caronnais-clear. He wished they didn't. As for the melody, she possessed a marvelous voice, but these notes took a drunkard's walk from key to key.

"The universe has looked forward with breath baited,
Not only Earth but the underworld and the starry sky,
For this day so well-known, even celebrated,
When all of us assembled see eye to eye
About the union of our shiny Hurultan, whose ability
It is the daylight forward to bring,
And dear Khaiantai, who will respond with agility,
So that between them they become parents of the spring — "

Cappen thanked the years that had taught him acting, in this case the role of a gravely attentive listener.

Aiala finished: "' — *And thus let us join together in chorusing my song.*' There! What do you think of that?"

"It is remarkable, my lady," Cappen achieved.

"I didn't just dash it off, you know. I weighed and shaped every word. For instance, that line '*Birds also will warble as soon as they hatch from the egg.*' That did not come easily."

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"An unusual concept, yes. In fact, I've never heard anything like it."

"Be frank. Tell me truly, could I make a few little improvements? Perhaps — I've considered — instead of '*as ardent as a prize bull*,' what about '*as vigorous as a stud horse*'?"

"Either simile is striking, my lady. I would be hard put to suggest any possible significant changes."

Aiala flared anew. "Then *why* do Orun, Vanis, and Lua sneer? How can they?"

"Sneering comes easily to some persons, my lady. It is not uncommonly an expression of envy. But to repeat myself, I do not propose that that applies in the present case. Tastes do differ. Far be it from me to imagine how your distinguished kindred might perceive a piece like this. Appropriateness to an occasion need have nothing to do with the quality of a work. It may merely happen to not quite fit in — like, say, a stately funeral dirge in a series of short-haul chanties. Or vice versa. Professionals like me," said Cappen forbearingly, "must needs learn to supply what may be demanded, and reserve our true art for connoisseurs."

He failed to mollify her. Instead, she stiffened and glared. "So! I'm unskilled, am I? I suppose you can do better?"

Cappen lifted his palms with a defensiveness not entirely feigned. "Oh, absolutely not. I simply meant — "

"I know. You make excuses for them on behalf of your own feelings."

"My lady, you urged me to be forthright. I hint at nothing but a conceivable, quite possibly hypothetical reconsideration of intent, in view of the context."

Indignation relieved him by yielding to haughtiness. "I told you how I would lose honor did I by now give anything but a song. Rather will I stay home and make them sorry."

Cappen's mind leaped like a hungry cat at a mouse. "Ah, but perhaps there is a third and better way out of this deplorable situation. Could you bring a different paean? I know many that have enjoyed great success at nuptial gatherings."

"And the gods will know, or in time they'll discover, that it is not new in the world. Shall I bring used goods to the sacred wedding — *I*?"

"Well, no, my lady, of course not."

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Aiala sniffed. "I daresay you can provide something original that will be good enough."

"Not to compare with my lady's. Much, much less exalted. Thereby, however, more readily blending into revelry, where the climate is really not conducive to concentrated attention. Grant me time, for indeed the standard to be met is heaven-high — "

She reached a decision. "Very well. A day and a night."

"Already tomorrow?" protested Cappen, appalled.

"*They* shall not think I waver weakly between creativity and vengeance. Tomorrow. In classical Xandran. Fresh and joyous. It had better be."

"But — but — "

"Then I will give you my opinion, freely and frankly."

"My lady, this is too sudden for imperfect flesh and feeble intelligence. I beg you — "

"Silence. It's more than I think I would grant anyone else, for the sake of your respectful words and song. I begin to have my suspicions about it, but will overlook them if you bring me one that is acceptable and that my winds can tell me has never been heard before on this earth or in its skies. Fail me, and your caravan will not get back to the plains, nor you to anywhere. Go!"

In a whirl of white, she vanished. The wind shrieked louder and colder, the storm clouds drew nearer.

VILLAGERS AND CARAVANEERS spied him trudging back down the path and, except for those out forlornly herding the sheep, swarmed together to meet him. Their babble surfed around his ears. He gestured vainly for silence. Bulak roared for it. As it fell, mumble by mumble, he and Deghred trod forward. "What did you do yonder?" he asked, less impassively than became a headman.

Cappen had donned his sternest face. "These be mysteries not to be spoken of until their completion," he declared. "Tomorrow shall see my return to them."

He dared not spend hours relating and explaining, when he had so few. Nor did it seem wise to admit that thus far, in all likelihood, he had made matters worse, especially for the travelers.

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Bulak stood foursquare. Deghred gave the bard a searching and skeptical look. The rest murmured, fingered prayer beads or josses, and otherwise registered an awe that was useful at the moment but, if disappointed, could well turn murderously vengeful.

Cappen went on headlong. "I must meditate, commune with high Powers, and work my special magianisms," he said. "For this I require to be alone, well sheltered, with writing materials and, uh, whatever else I may require."

Bulak stared. "Suddenly you speak as if born amidst us."

"Take that as a token of how deep and powerful the mysteries are." Cappen forgot to keep his voice slowly tolling. "But, but does anybody here know Xandran?"

Wind whistled, clouds swallowed the sun, three ravens flew by like forerunners of darkness.

"I have some command of the tongue," said Deghred, almost as if he suspected a trap.

"Classical Xandran?" cried Cappen.

"No. Who does but a few scholars? I mean what they use in those parts nowadays — that is, the traders and sailors I've had to do with. And, yes, once a crew of pirates; but I think that was a different dialect."

The foolish, fire-on-ice hope died. Still — "I may want to call on what knowledge you have. That will depend on what my divinations reveal to me. Hold yourself prepared. Meanwhile, what of my immediate needs?"

"We have a place," Bulak said. "Lowly, but all we can offer."

"The spirits take small account of Earthly grandeur," his elder wife assured them, for whatever that was worth.

Thus Cappen found himself and his few possessions in the village storehouse. It was a single room, mainly underground, with just enough walls beneath the sod roof to allow an entryway. After the door was closed, a lamp gave the only light. While the space was fairly large, very little was available, for it was crammed with roots, dried meat, sheepskins, and other odorous goods. The air hung thick and dank. However, it was out of the wind, and private.

Too private, maybe. Cappen had nothing to take his mind off his thoughts.

He settled in, a pair of skins between him and the floor, one over his

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shoulders. Besides the lamp, he had been given food, a crock of wine, a goblet, a crock for somewhat different purposes, and his tools — a bottle of ink, several quill pens, and a sheaf of paper, articles such as merchants used in their own work. Now he began wondering, more and more frantically, what to do with them.

Ordinarily he could have dashed something off. But a canticle in classical Xandran, suitable for a marriage made in heaven? Especially when the cost of its proving unsatisfactory would be widespread death, including his? He did not feel inspired.

The language requirement was obstacle enough. His wits twisted to and fro, hunting for a way, any way, around it. Through Deghred, he could now get a doubtless very limited acquaintance with the present-day speech. He recalled hearing that it descended directly from the antique, so much of it must be similar. How would pronunciation have changed, though, and grammar, and even vocabulary? In his days at home he had read certain famous poems five or six hundred years old. It had been difficult; only a lexicon made it possible at all; and the archaic idiom of the Rojan hillmen suggested how alien the verses would have sounded.

He glugged a mouthful of wine. It hit an empty stomach and thence sent a faint glow to his head. He did have a bit more to go on. When he concentrated, he could drag scraps of the proper classical up from the forgetfulness in which they had lain. Maybe his newly acquired facility helped with that. But they were just scraps. He had yawned through a year of this as part of the education that even a bastard son of a minor nobleman was supposed to receive, but declensions, conjugations, moods, tenses, and the dismal rest set his attention adrift in the direction of girls, flowery forests, rowdy friends, composing a song of his own that might seduce a girl, or almost anything else. What stayed with him had done so randomly, like snatches of his aunt's moralizings when he was a child and couldn't escape.

And then he had Aiala's lyrics. That wasn't by design. Every word clung to him, like the memory of every bit of a certain meal years ago that he had had to eat and praise because the cook was a formidable witch. He feared he would never get rid of either. Still, the thing gave him a partial but presumably trustworthy model, a basis for comparison and thus for a guesswork sort of reconstruction.

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He drank again. His blood started to buzz faintly, agreeably. Of course, he'd need his reason unimpaired when — if — he got to that task. But "if" was the doomful word. First he needed the poesy, the winged fancy, concepts evoking words that in turn made the concepts live. Anxiety, to give it a euphemistic name, held his imagination in a swamp of glue. And wasn't that metaphor a repulsive symptom of his condition? Anything he might force out of himself would belong in yonder crock.

So he must lift his heart, free his spirit. Then he could hope his genius would soar. After which he could perhaps render the Caronnais into Xandran without mutilating it beyond recognition. The basic difficulty was that to create under these circumstances he must get drunk, no good condition for a translator. He suspected the necessary degree of drunkenness was such that when he awoke he wouldn't care whether he lived or died — until much too late. The lady of the winds did not expect to be kept waiting.

Besides — he spat a string of expletives — she demanded not only words but music. The two must go together as naturally as breath and heartbeat, or the song was a botch and a mockery. This meant they must grow side by side, intertwining, shaping one another, as he worked. Oh, usually he could find an existing melody that fitted a poem he had in process, or vice versa. Neither was admissible in this case; both must never have been heard before in the world. He could attempt a double originality, but that, he knew, would only be possible with the Caronnais native to him. To force the subsequent translation into that mold — well, give him a week or two and maybe he might, but since he had only until tomorrow —

He glugged again. He would doubtless be wise to ballast the wine with food. It wasn't the worst imaginable food, caravaneers' rations, smoked meat and fish, butter, cheese, hardtack, rice cold but lately boiled with leeks and garlic, dried figs and apricots and — On the other hand, he lacked appetite. What use wisdom anyway? He glugged again.

If this was the end of his wanderings, he thought, it was not quite what he had visualized and certainly far too early. Not that he did well to pity himself. Think of his waymates, think of the poor innocent dwellers throughout these mountains. Surely he had enjoyed much more than them, much more colorful. It behooved a minstrel, a knight of the road, to hark back, as gladly as the wine enabled.

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Most recently, yes, to Sanctuary. He had had his troubles there, but the same was true of every place, and the multifarious pleasures much outnumbered them. Ending with delicious Peridis — may she fare always well — and their last, so unfortunately interrupted moment —

He stirred on his sheepskins. By all the nymphs of joy, it happened he had brought away a souvenir of it! There he could for a while take refuge from his troubles, other than in drink. And perhaps, said practicality, this would liberate his genius.

Groping about, shivering in the chill, he found the book. Cross-legged, he opened it on his lap and peered through the dim, smoky, smelly lamplight.

The words leaped out at him. They were in no language he had ever heard of, nor was it anywhere named; but he read it as easily as he did his own, instantly understanding what everything he came upon referred to. Not that that brought full knowledge. The world he found was an abstraction, a bubble, floating cheerfully free in a space and a time beyond his ken. No matter. He guessed it was almost as airy there.

The musical notation stood equally clear to him, tunes lilting while he scanned them. Their scale was not too different from that common in the Westlands. He would need only a little practice before singing and strumming them in a way that everybody he met ought to like. What exoticism there was should lend piquancy. Yes, for his future career —

Future!

He sprang to his feet. His head banged against a rafter.

HASTILY FETCHED through biting wind and gathering murk, Deghred im Dalagh hunkered down and peered at Cappen Varra. "Well, what do you crave of me?" he asked.

"In a minute, I pray you." Himself sitting tailor-fashion, the bard tried to arrange paper, inkpot, and open book for use. Bloody awkward. No help at all to the image of a knowing and confident rescuer.

"I've a feeling you're none too sure either," Deghred murmured.

"But I am! I simply need a bit of assistance. Who doesn't ever? The craftsman his apprentices, the priest his acolytes, and you a whole gang of underlings. I want no more than a brief...consultation."

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"To what end?" Deghred paused. "They're growing dubious of you. What kind of Powers are you trying to deal with? What could come of it?"

"The good of everybody."

"Or the ruin?"

"I haven't time to argue." *If I did, I suspect you'd be utterly appalled and make me cease and desist. Then you'd offer an extravagant sacrifice to a being that no such thing will likely appease — for you haven't met her as I have.*

Deghred's voice harshened. "Be warned. If you don't do what you promised — "

"Well, I didn't exactly *promise* — "

"My men won't let you leave with us, and I suspect the villagers will cast you out. They fear you'll carry a curse."

Cappen was not much surprised. "Suppose, instead, I gain clemency, weather as it ought to be, and the passes open for you. Will they give me anything better than thanks? I'm taking a considerable personal risk, you know."

"Ah, should you succeed, that's different. Although these dwellers be poor folk, I don't doubt they'd heap skins and pelts at your feet. I'll show you how to sell the stuff at good prices in Temanhassa."

"You and your fellow traders are not poor men," said Cappen pointedly.

"Naturally, you'd find us, ah, not ungenerous."

"Shall we say a tenth share of the profit from your expedition?"

"A tenth? How can you jest like that in an hour like this?"

"Retreating to winter in the Empire would cost more. As you must well know, who've had to cope year after year with its taxes, bribes, and extortionate suppliers." Getting snowed in here would be still worse, but Cappen thought it imprudent to explain that that had become a distinct possibility.

"We are not misers or ingrates. Nor are we unreasonable. Three percent is, indeed, lavish."

"Let us not lose precious time in haggling. Seven and a half."

"Five, and my friendship, protection, and recommendations to influential persons in Temanhassa."

"Done!" said Cappen. He sensed the trader's surprise and a certain

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instinctive disappointment. But the need to get on with the work was very real, and the bargain not a bad one.

Meanwhile he had arranged his things just barely well enough that he could begin. Dipping pen in ink, he said, "This is a strange work I must do, and potent forces are afoot. As yet I cannot tell of it, save to pledge that there is nothing of evil. As I write, I want you to talk to me in Xandran. Naught else."

Deghred gaped, remembered his dignity, and replied, "May I wonder why? You do not know that tongue, and I have only some smatterings."

"You may wonder if you choose. What you must do is talk."

"But what about?"

"Anything. Merely keep the words flowing."

Deghred groped for a minute. Such an order is not as simple as one might think. Almost desperately, he began: "I have these fine seasonings. They were shipped to me from distant lands at great expense. To you and you alone will I offer them at ridiculously low wholesale prices, because I hold you in such high esteem. Behold, for an ounce of pungent peppercorn , a mere ten zirgats. I look on this not as a loss to me, although it is, but a gift of goodwill."

Cappen scribbled. While he listened, the meanings came clear to him. He even mentally made up for the stumblings, hesitations, and thick accent. The language was his to the extent that it was the other man's; and he could have replied with fluency. What slowed him was the search in his mind for words that weren't spoken. "Knot" and "insoluble," for instance. How would one say them? ...Ah, yes. Assuming that what he pseudo-remembered was correct. Maybe the connotations were strictly of a rope and of minerals that didn't melt in water. He jotted them down provisionally, but he wanted more context.

Deghred stopped. "Go on," Cappen urged.

"Well, uh — O barefaced brazen robber! Ten zirgats? If this withered and moldy lot went for two in the bazaar, I would be astounded. Yet, since I too am prepared to take a loss for the sake of our relationship, I will offer three — "

"Uh, could you give me something else?" Cappen interrupted. "Speech not so, m-m, commercial?"

"What can it be? My dealings with Xandrans are all commercial."

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"Oh, surely not all. Doing business in itself involves sociability, the cultivation of friendly feelings, does it not? Tell me what might be said at a shared meal over a cup of wine."

Deghred pondered before he tried: "How did your sea voyage go? I hope you're not troubled by the heat. It is seldom so hot here at this time of year."

"Nothing more — more intimate? Don't men like these ever talk of their families? Of love and marriage?"

"Not much. I can't converse with them easily, you know. Women, yes."

"Say on."

"Well, I remember telling one fellow, when he asked, that the best whorehouse in the city is the Purple Lotus. Especially if you can get Zerasa. By Kalat's cloven hoof, what a wench! Plump and sweet as a juicy plum, sizzling as a spitted rump roast, and the tricks she knows — " Deghred reminisced in considerable detail.

It wasn't quite what Cappen had meant. Still, association evoked words also amorous, but apparently decorous. His pen flew, scrawling, scratching out, spattering the paper and his tunic. When Degredh ended with a gusty sigh, Cappen had enough.

"Good," he said. "My thanks — albeit this is toward the end of saving your own well-being and prosperity too. You may go now. Five percent, remember."

The merchant rose and stretched himself as well as the roof allowed. "If naught else, that was a small respite from reality. Ah, well. You do have hopes? Are you coming along?"

"No," said Cappen. "My labors are just beginning."

Day broke still and cloudless but cruelly cold. Breath smoked white, feet crunched ice. When he emerged at mid-morning, Cappen found very few folk outdoors. Those stared at him out of their own frozen silence. The rest were huddled inside, keeping warm while they waited to learn their fate. It was as if the whole gigantic land held its breath.

He felt no weariness, he could not. He seemed almost detached from himself, his head light but sky-clear. His left arm cradled the harp. Tucked into his belt was a folded sheet of paper, but he didn't expect any need to

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refer to it. The words thereon were graven into him, together with their music. They certainly should be. The gods of minstrelsy knew — or would have known, if they weren't so remote from this wild highland — how he had toiled over the lyrics, searching about, throwing away effort after effort, inch by inch finding his way to a translation that fitted the notes and was not grossly false to the original, and at last, not satisfied but with time on his heels, had rehearsed over and over and over for his audience of turnips and sheepskins.

Now he must see how well it played for a more critical listener.

If it succeeded, if he survived, the first part of the reward he'd claim was to be let to sleep undisturbed until next sunrise. How remotely that bliss glimmered!

He trudged onward, scarcely thinking about anything, until he came to the altar. There he took stance, gazed across the abyss to peaks sword-sharp against heaven, and said, "My lady, here I am in obedience to your command."

It sounded unnaturally loud. No echo responded, no wings soared overhead, he stood alone in the middle of aloneness.

After a while, he said, "I repeat, begging my lady's pardon, that here I am with that which I promised you."

The least of breezes stirred. It went like liquid across his face and into his nostrils. In so vast a silence, he heard it whisper.

"I humbly hope my offering will please you and all the gods," he said.

And there she was, awesome and beautiful before him. A phantom wind tossed her hair and whirled snow-sparkles around her whiteness. "Well?" she snapped.

Could she too, even she, have been under strain? He doffed his cap and bowed low. "If my lady will deign to heed, I've created an epithalamium such as she desires, and have the incomparable honor of rendering it unto her, to be known forever after as her unique gift at the turning of the winter."

"That was quick, after you protested you could not."

"The thought of you inspired me as never erenow have I been inspired."

"To make it out of nothing?"

"Oh, no, my lady. Out of experience, and whatever talent is mine,

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and, above all else, as I confessed, the shining vision of my lady. I swear, and take for granted you can immediately verify, that neither melody nor lyrics were ever heard in this world, Heaven or Earth or the Elsewhere, before I prepared them for you."

He doubted that she could in fact scan space and time at once, so thoroughly. But no matter. He did not doubt that Nerigo kept his half-illicit arcanum and whatever came to it through his mirror that was not a mirror well sealed against observation human and nonhuman. Whatever gods had the scope and power to spy on him must also have much better things to do.

Aiala's glance lingered more than it pierced. "I do not really wish to destroy you, Cappen Varra," she told him slowly. "You have a rather charming way about you. But — should you disappoint me — you will understand that one does have one's position to maintain."

"Oh, absolutely. And how better could a man perish than in striving to serve such a lady? Yet I dare suggest that you will find my ditty acceptable."

The glorious eyes widened. The slight mercurial shivers almost ceased. "Sing, then," she said low.

"Allow me first to lay forth what the purpose is. Unless I am grievously mistaken, it is to provide an ode to nuptial joy. Now, my thought was that this is best expressed in the voice of the bride. The groom is inevitably impatient for nightfall. She, though, however happy, may at the same time be a little fearful, certain of loving kindness yet, in her purity, unsure what to await and what she can do toward making the union rapturous. Khaiantai is otherwise. She is a goddess, and here is an annual renewal. My song expresses her rapture in tones of unbounded gladness."

Aiala nodded. "That's not a bad theme," she said, perhaps a trifle wistfully.

"Therefore, my lady, pray bear with my conceit, in the poetic sense, that she sings with restrained abandon, in colloquial terms of revelry, not always classically correct. For we have nothing to go on about that save the writings of the learned, do we? There must have been more familiar speech among lesser folk, commoners, farmers, herders, artisans, lowly but still the majority, the backbone of the nation and the salt of the earth.

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To them too, to the Life Force that is in them, should the paean appeal."

"You may be right," said Aiala with a tinge of exasperation. "Let me hear."

While he talked, Cappen Varra, in the presence of one who fully knew the language, mentally made revisions. Translating, he had chosen phrasings that lent themselves to it.

The moment was upon him. He took off his gloves, gripped the harp, strummed it, and cleared his throat.

"We begin with a chorus," he said. Therewith he launched into song.

"Bridegroom and bride!
Knot that's insoluble,
Voices all voluble,
Hail it with pride. — "

She hearkened. Her bosom rose and fell.

"Now the bride herself sings.

"When a merry maiden marries,
Sorrow goes and pleasure tarries;
Every sound becomes a song,
All is right, and nothing's wrong! — "

He saw he had captured her, and continued to the bacchanalian end.

"Sullen night is laughing day —
All the year is merry May!"

The chords rang into stillness. Cappen waited. But he knew. A huge, warm easing rose in him like a tide.

"That is wonderful," Aiala breathed. "Nothing of the kind, ever before — "

"It is my lady's," he said with another bow, while he resumed his cap and gloves.

She straightened into majesty. "You have earned what you shall have. Henceforward until the proper winter, the weather shall smile, the dwellers shall prosper, and you and your comrades shall cross my mountains free of all hindrance."

"My lady overwhelms me," he thought it expedient to reply.

For a heartbeat, her grandeur gave way, ever so slightly. "I could almost wish that you — But no. Farewell, funny mortal."

She leaned over. Her lips brushed his. He felt as if struck by soft

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lightning. Then she was gone. It seemed to him that already the air grew more mild.

For a short while before starting back with his news he stood silent beneath the sky, suddenly dazed. His free hand strayed to the paper at his belt. Doubtless he would never know more about this than he now did. Yet he wished that someday, somehow, if only in another theatrical performance, he could see the gracefully gliding boats of the Venetian gondoliers.

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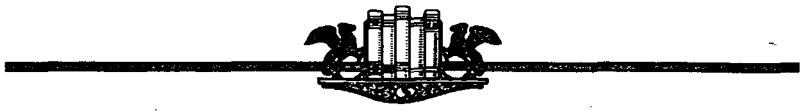

Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

SO ONE DAY in Austin, Texas, four members of a writers' group decide they want to play in the same shared world. Being fascinated with mythology and folk tales, they settle on a world where every myth, fairy tale, and legend is literally true, centering their attention on the made-up city of San Cibola, just north of San Francisco. They divide the city in four, each author taking a section, and start to write.

But few authors write for themselves. Most of them want to be read, so these four men (Bill Willingham, Mark Finn, Chris Roberson, and Matthew Sturges) put together a magazine/website called Clockwork Storybook (visit it at www.clockworkstorybook.com), and each publish a story a month on the site. The stories are soon joined with reviews of fantasy-related books, TV shows, and movies, not to mention interviews with the likes of Neil Gaiman, Charles Vess, and Sean Stewart.

A little time passes and the next thing you know these Tick Tock Men have five thousand regular readers every month and now they're publishing books you can hold in your hand without the need of some electronic e-book device.

"The decision to go to paper," Mark Finn tells me when I e-mail him to ask about this collective, "was always the plan. We just assumed that we would be doing standard small press runs at first. The idea was to build an audience using the Internet, and then when things were economically viable for us, publish books that the audience would buy."

But why would readers buy the books when the stories are available for free on the site?

"Because they want to give them to their Luddite friends, or keep them for posterity, or read them when the computer is not on."

Much like Jim Munroe, whom we've discussed in previous installments of this column, the Tick Tock

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Men have found a way to circumvent the New York publishing behemoths and take their work directly to the people. But it's self-publishing, I hear some of you say, in that tone of voice that places it on a par with cleaning toilets — which come to think of it, is just as honorable a job as any other; someone has to do it. But I digress.

"Our goal," Finn goes on to explain, "was to take the indy record label or creator-owned comic publisher kind of business model and apply it to book publishing. These are our baby steps now, but so far, it's working better than we had anticipated."

But now we come to the crunch. Are the books any good?

Gods New and Used, by Mark Finn, Clockwork Storybook, $19.95.

Finn's *Gods New and Used* certainly speaks well of their collective endeavor. It brings together four San Cibola novelets and novellas for an amusing, and at times thoughtful, exploration of the interaction between humans and the "Neighbors," the Tick Tock Men's term for mythical beings. (Normal folks are called "Normans.") There are new gods and old gods, the Wandering Jew and a Cadillac-driving cherub Cupid, roadtrips and Elvis, mayhem and even a bittersweet love story.

My favorite in the collection is "The Secret Life of Lawrence Croft, or Three Days of the Con-Dorks," which Kevin Smith (*Clerks, Chasing Amy*, etc.) fans will enjoy and which could well become as much a classic of the convention experience as has Sharyn McCrumb's *Bimbos of the Death Sun*. On one level it's the story of three fanboys and a neophyte collector attending a comic convention, but when you add in the fact that gods are real in this world, the humor level quickly escalates.

The funniest scenes are when the new manager of the hotel (himself an expert in hosting gatherings of the Neighbors) interacts with the con-goers. He thinks the various vampires and costumed folk are for real and calls in the appropriate magical back-up to keep them in line. Add in a scatological god to do Stephen King proud and you have a preposterous, hilarious, and at times, very true take of such conventions.

But happily, Finn doesn't play it all for laughs. There are serious moments here as well, moments that provide real insight into the hearts and minds of his four so-

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cially inept characters. Finn plays fair, showing us their opinionated, unattractive sides, but he does manage to make us care about them — some more than others, mind you.

Gods New and Used is a fine debut, and I'm looking forward to Finn's next book.

Voices of Thunder, by Chris Roberson, Clockwork Storybook, $16.95.

Chris Roberson's *Voices of Thunder* reads and feels like a mystery novel as it opens, and while he's written stories set in San Cibola, he's come back to our world for this one.

It starts with freelance reporter Spencer Finch. While he's trying to track down some dirt on business magnate J. Nathan Pierce, he learns that his grandfather has died and that he has a small inheritance waiting for him. Finch, estranged since his teens from this grandfather who raised him and his brother, is in no hurry to pick up the parcels. When he does, he finds himself with a locked wooden box for which there's no key and a box full of old pulp magazines and manuscripts.

Finch's investigation into Pierce's business dealings takes him to New Orleans, Vegas, and back and forth across Texas. Bored in the various motels he's staying in, he begins to read some of the box's stories, and we do, too.

This is the place where the book could easily have fallen apart, and to be frank, I thought it would when I read the first of these "reprinted" pulp stories since Roberson captures the required voice right down to the purple prose and implausible plotlines. He tackles take-offs on the Shadow, westerns, pirate stories, old ballads, and even a short Greek play written in the classic style of ancient times. And the more I read these bits, the more impressed I became with Roberson's chameleon ability to take on the various styles, all so different from each other, and each different as well from the somewhat hardboiled voice of the principal narrative.

I liked that voice best of all: sardonic, with the touch of a wiseacre. Here he sums up Norse mythology:

"The gods, or the 'Aesir' as Royce called them, seemed pretty much regular folks. They had kids, held jobs, got feeble and eventually died. In between, though, came the magic swords and the flying chariots and the horses with eight legs. Other than that, old Asgard sounded

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like your average everyday trailer park, with silver shields everywhere instead of aluminum siding."

Near the end of the book Finch discovers that all these stories he's been reading connect to the piece he's writing on the business magnate Pierce and the book gets both weird and moves into high gear. The final, big revelation didn't completely work for me, probably because I'm the sort of person who usually enjoys the puzzles and mysteries far more than the explanation. But I certainly enjoyed the trip to get there.

Like Finn, Roberson is another author to watch.

Beneath the Skin and Other Stories, by Matthew Sturges, Clockwork Storybook. $16.95.

The third of the Tick Tock Men under discussion here is Matthew Sturges, and he weighs in with *Beneath the Skin and Other Stories*.

The opening piece, from which the collection gets its name, is a retelling of the old selchie legend, moved here to the aforementioned shared world city of San Cibola on the west coast of California. It's a traditional sort of a tale, told in a straightforward manner, which suits both the turn-of-the-century sections as well as the modern parts of the story. It has interesting characters, a strong story, and some terrific imagery (I loved the ghost bridge that rises on nights of the full moon), but it's not so different from what many other writers might have done with the same material.

The same can't be said of the next two pieces, one of which takes us to a fascinating and bizarre version of hell, the other into the mind of a schizophrenic — or is she really seeing ghosts and hearing voices? — the one story darker than the next. "In Theory" follows, utilizing some of the characters we met back in Mark Finn's collection, and continues the spiral into darkness with a wonderfully challenging take on the whole idea of serial killers.

Except for the last two short pieces in the collection, which struck me as somewhat one-note and marginal — especially in contrast to the material preceding them — these are gripping, well-executed stories, full of sharp ideas, interesting characters, and satisfyingly twisty plots.

Obviously the Clockwork Storybook collective is doing something for these writers, since all three of these previously unpublished members are producing quality

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work. Or perhaps it's simply a matter of like attracting like. But whatever it is, it's certainly working and I'm going to be interested to see where all three of them go from here.

Down the Mysterly River, by Bill Willingham, Clockwork Storybook, $14.

Finally, we have Bill Willingham, the granddaddy of the group, at least in terms of his published credits. Willingham has written the scripts for a number of popular comic book series including *The Elementals*, *Ironwood*, and a favorite of mine, *Coventry*, as well as one shots such as *Merv Pumpkinhead, Agent of Dream* and too many others to mention.

This is the first prose book of his I've read and considering how outlandish and strange some of his comic book work has been, I was surprised to find *Down the Mysterly River* to be a sweet, sensitive adventure story with an ending I can only hint at, but it's something that I don't doubt will warm the hearts of most long-time readers.

On the surface it reminded me a little of Mary Brown's work (such as *Pigs Don't Fly*) with its mix of humans and anthropomorphic animals — yes, there are talking animals here. Our heroes are a bear, a badger, and a cranky old tom cat who have all awakened in a mysterious forest along with a human Boy Scout named Max the Wolf, the latter arriving in a mysterious Heroes Wood for animals because of his nickname. None of them are quite sure how they ended up in this place, although they're under the impression that they died in their own worlds and this is now some sort of afterlife.

That being the case, it's not a very pleasant world, for the quartet are being mercilessly hunted by a group called the Blue Cutters and their hounds. The hunters get their name from their blue swords with which they cut away the parts of a being's personality that they don't find acceptable, leaving the ensuing entity so different from who they once were as to be unrecognizable.

But there are sanctuaries in this forest, and the main story here is how our four heroes attempt to reach the closest one, using their wits and their strengths, and learning to trust and depend on one another.

There's a YA feel about this book, but that's not a negative insofar as I'm concerned. I was charmed

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and delighted throughout, as I'm sure many adult readers will be. But this is also a wonderful book to pass on to the young reader in your life since it's one of those gems that will awaken in them that sense of wonder that still draws older readers to this field.

So, in short, all four of these Tick Tock Men are producing strong, readable fiction. The fact that they're self-published becomes irrelevant in terms of the quality of the work. In terms of production values, they could have used an editor in places, and the books' interior page design isn't always what it could be (larger margins, please — the pages look cramped), but the cover designs are snappy (I especially like the one for Finn's book), and the stories, the words, the reason we buy books and read them, are as good as or better than much of what comes from the larger, perhaps more professional publishing houses. And I for one am glad to have had the chance to read them.

I appreciate the self-publishing of these books for the same reason that I'll order, oh, say a Dan Bern CD from his website: it's something I want to experience but it won't necessarily show up in my local stores. We need to change our minds about what the right and wrong ways are for artistic material to reach its audience. And we can start by supporting small endeavors such as these. And since you can sample the material for free on the Internet (just as you can MP3s on many indy musicians' websites), you have nothing to lose.

Don't have a computer? Many public libraries, as well as some cafés and book stores, have free Internet connections that you can use.

Infinity Points, by Jim Munroe, Lickspittle Ventures, 1995, $4.

Having mentioned Jim Munroe earlier, I just thought I'd bring to your attention this novella of his. It's an older publication, but he's found some physical copies for sale, plus he's offering it up for a free download on his site at:

www.nomediakings.org/ThrInfinity.htm

And while it isn't really the sort of book we normally discuss in this column, the reason I'm bringing it to your attention is that you meet characters in it that later show up in his novel *Flyboy Action Figure Comes with Gasmask* which definitely does fit into this column. Unfortunately, *Infinity Points* isn't

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of quite the same high quality as *Flyboy*. While the novella also delves into the lives of some marginal, twenty-something characters in '90s Toronto, the writing isn't quite as assured as the longer novel and the plot remains rather aimless, jumping from scene to scene as we follow a few days in the life of a copyshop clerk named Mark.

But there's much to like as well, in a collection-of-vignettes sort of sense. One of my favorite bits was Mark's theory that this odd café he and his friends frequent is a testing ground for a drug company that's putting creativity-enhancers in their coffee. If only.

Infinity Points isn't a good introduction to Jim Munroe's quirky work. Think of it more as the bonus section on a DVD where you get the behind the scenes info, deleted scenes, and such. My advice is to use your hard-earned dollars to buy *Flyboy* and download this from Munroe's website.

Phoenix Fire, by Tim O'Laughlin, Bodhidharma Publishing, 2001, $15.

One of the sure signs of many first novels is that an author puts all the great loves and enthusiasms of his life into it. By that token we can guess that Tim O'Laughlin is passionate about music (particularly acoustic, guitar-driven songs and Celtic tunes), mountain biking, the environment, the Western mystery tradition, soul mates, and reincarnation, since his novel revolves around all of the above with great and detailed enthusiasm.

I don't mean that to sound negative. It's what I like about a good first novel, the kind that the author has put his heart and soul into. It's much like a first album from a songwriter: the tracks chosen to appear on it took a lifetime to experience and write and, for all the occasional stumbling of execution or performance, often something bright and special still shines through.

Such is certainly the case here.

O'Laughlin introduces us to a likable cast of characters, either coming together or already living in contemporary Northern California, who come to discover that they've been friends and intimates over many previous lifetimes. There's Ryan Stratton, lawyer and musician. Doug Ackerman, another musician and reporter, and his wife Pam. Gayle Draper, Fort Bragg's resident psychic and a shopowner. Larry Robinson, a retired hypnotherapist. And Audrey

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Peckham, a child therapist and environmental activist.

As they continue to explore the relationships between them, both in the modern world and past lives, they realize that they are approaching a confrontation with the One Without A Soul, an enemy who has defeated them over and over again throughout their previous lives. In this lifetime, he's a business magnate who has taken over a lumbering company and plans to clear-cut a section of old world forest.

O'Laughlin does a good job of bringing his characters together and into the conflict, and the conflict itself makes for gripping reading. The same can also be said for those aforementioned enthusiasms that he brings into the book.

However, he also falls prey to a couple shortcomings that plague many first novels. The two prime offenders here are the overwriting and characterization.

Phoenix Fire really needed the hand of a good editor. It's not that the writing is bad — far from it. It's that there's too much of it. Trimming text, tightening scenes, showing instead of expositional telling — all would have improved the flow of the book.

And while the characters are well, even lovingly, brought to life, they only wear one of two hats: white or black. There are no gray areas and that, for all the affection we might acquire for them, makes for obvious storytelling.

That said, this is still a fascinating and ambitious novel that I hope you will try. Personally, I always prefer to read a book by an author who reaches for the stars, but doesn't quite succeed, to one who won't even make the attempt.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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BOOKS

ROBERT K.J. KILLHEFFER

Return to the Whorl, by Gene Wolfe, Tor, 2001, $25.95.

THE LAST time I reviewed a book by Gene Wolfe, it was *Lake of the Long Sun*, the second volume of *The Book of the Long Sun*. That was in my very first column for this magazine, back in 1994.

I haven't stilled my pen from lack of interest. Rather the opposite: I've read Wolfe devotedly since I was fourteen years old — for twenty years now — and I've reviewed a great many of his books enthusiastically over the years I've worked as a critic. I've written about his novels, from *Soldier of Arete* to *Castleview* to *Nightside the Long Sun*, and collections of his stories such as *Castle of Days* and *Storeys from the Old Hotel*. I'd guess I've written more reviews of Gene Wolfe's work — more wildly positive reviews, without a doubt — than of any other writer's.

And that's why I've not considered him in these pages since that first column. I've wanted to give attention to new writers, and established writers whose books I had never reviewed at any length. More than that, though, I worried that in reviewing Wolfe I would end up repeating myself too much, rehearsing the praise I had spent on his previous work. How often can the coals of enduring admiration be fanned into something resembling flame?

I needn't have feared. *Return to the Whorl* — and the whole *Book of the Short Sun*, of which it is the third and concluding volume — certainly offers a feast of the delicacies we've come to expect from Wolfe, but it's also got riches uniquely its own. And it would be a nearly unforgivable shame to suspend comment on what will likely prove to be the best novel published in the sf field this year, and the best multi-volume work of the transmillennial period, simply because its author has achieved so much so

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often in the past. *Return to the Whorl* provides a nearly perfect culmination to a nearly perfect sf epic. (Its only disappointment is the unfortunate and atypically bland title.) *The Book of the Short Sun* may be, in some ways, Wolfe's best work ever — and I say this of an author who's been likened to Mozart, Homer, and other giants of Western culture.

Can I make it any clearer? *You should read these books.*

As its title suggests, *The Book of the Short Sun* connects to *The Book of the Long Sun* which preceded it, and more loosely to Wolfe's classic *Book of the New Sun* as well. It's something of a direct sequel to the *Long Sun* series, which concluded with the departure of some of the inhabitants of the "Long Sun Whorl" — an interstellar colony ship — for new lives on the two habitable planets, Blue and Green, of the "Short Sun" star system at which it had arrived. One of those colonists, Horn, undertakes a mission on behalf of his town to return to the Long Sun Whorl and bring the near-legendary Silk, revolutionary leader of their old city, down to Blue to become their governor. The volumes of *The Book of the Short Sun* are almost entirely Horn's record of his journey.

At heart it's a tale of travel with deep echoes of the *Odyssey*. In the first volume, *On Blue's Waters*, Horn sets out alone in a small boat to find the mysterious town of Pajarocu, where there is supposed to be a functional lander planning a trip back to the Long Sun Whorl. He encounters strange characters and strange places, and his mission goes terribly wrong when the Pajarocu lander carries its passengers not to the old Whorl, but to the planet Green, a world of steamy jungles dominated by the vampiric reptilian inhumi, who have killed or enslaved most of the colonists who landed there. Horn nevertheless reaches the Long Sun Whorl (in a sense), and his experiences there, along with his trip back to his town on Blue, make up the action of *Return to the Whorl*.

This thin *précis* suggests some of the complexities of the storyline, but it's the merest iceberg's tip. Wolfe never weaves his tales along a single simple line, and *The Book of the Short Sun* approaches his dense early novel *Peace* in narrative complexity. From the start, Horn spends at least as much time describing the events that follow his return to Blue as he does on his quest for Silk, and those two narratives intertwine and spawn digressions

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as they unfold. In *Soldier of the Mist* and *Soldier of Arete*, Wolfe set himself the arduous task of recounting a story through the eyes of a narrator who cannot recall events from one day to the next, and he stayed true to his conceit with astounding fidelity. So he does here. All the action of *The Book of the Short Sun* must be described after the fact, when Horn finds free moments (and materials) to set down his account, and frequently he runs out of time before he can complete the stated goals of any given chapter. We must sometimes piece together events from fragments, and we usually encounter characters in passing before we learn how Horn met them. It may sound maddening, but it's actually exhilarating.

The richness of the three volumes of *The Book of the Short Sun* beggars description. As he has proven time and again, Wolfe can conjure worlds and characters to people them more vividly in the interstices of his text than most other writers can do in ten thousand words of lump description. Horn spends time as a kind of prisoner-king, an unwilling governor, in the tropical town of Gaon; he helps lead another town, Blanko, to a successful defense against conquest by its neighbor, Soldo; he overthrows the iniquitous government of corrupt judges in the seaside town of Dorp. He hates the vampiric inhumi, but comes to love one inhumu as a son, and another as a daughter. He loves the siren Seawrack, travels with Silk's talking bird Oreb and the equally intelligent, bearlike Babbie, and becomes a favored friend of the Vanished People, the original inhabitants of Blue and Green. He befriends the blinded trooper Pig, and brings back a new eye for his old android teacher, Maytera Marble. And yet all of this action and interaction retain a quiet, contemplative mood in Horn's narrative, and it's Horn's inner journey — his yearning to find Silk, his longing for his wife Nettle, his strained relationship with his son Sinew, his tortured guilt and deep desire to do good — that forms the true center of the whole long novel.

For sheer narrative density, *The Book of the Short Sun* recalls nothing to me so much as Don DeLillo's monumental novel *Underworld* (1997), but where DeLillo builds his massive referential edifice on the foundations of an ostensibly real shared history and culture — the matter of America in the second half of the twentieth century —

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Wolfe performs the same feat while inventing that background of which his story makes fluid allusive use. He has invented some of it before, in the nine volumes that comprise *The Book of the New Sun* and *The Book of the Long Sun*, and of course his imagined future history draws archaeologically upon not only the world DeLillo uses — our world — but also the literary traditions of several decades of sf (and centuries of written work in general). Still, the sense of a vast world behind and beyond the text of *The Book of the Short Sun* stands as a stunning achievement.

Most amazing is how Wolfe manages this without abandoning either the classical form of the novel or the gaudy, audacious concepts of sf. In strategy and even prose, Wolfe owes more to Melville, Kipling, and even Rider Haggard than he does to Pynchon, Coover, or any other light of more recent decades. Wolfe has been justly celebrated for his linguistic powers, and his language retains its familiar precision, intelligence, and evocative power in *The Book of the Short Sun*, but his are not the fireworks of edgy neologism found in Gibson or Womack. His prose recalls Nabokov, not Joyce.

Wolfe's materials might have sprung straight from the pages of *Thrilling Wonder Stories*. Alien vampires? Interstellar colony ships? Kindly android grandmothers? Wolfe is perhaps the only writer — living or dead — who can take elements like these and produce something with the profundity of human feeling of Dostoevsky. He accomplishes this with a humane vision and burning conscience that infuse every line. Consider this moment: Horn has brought back a single working mechanical eye and given it to Maytera Marble, who has been blind after her own parts gave out. Of her joy, he thinks, "if ever comes a time when I must justify my existence — when I must account for the space I have occupied, the food I have eaten, and the air I have breathed — I will tell about Maytera's eye first of all. I doubt that I will have to tell anything else."

Wolfe makes his gaudiest element — the blood-hungry inhumi — into a source of some of the most powerfully moving moments in *The Book of the Short Sun*. From the start we know them as horrifying, despicable creatures who mimic the appearance and behavior of human beings while they hunt them. Horn's son was nearly killed by one as an infant, and Horn loathes them

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almost beyond reason. But as he sails for Pajarocu he grudgingly befriends one of these creatures, and travels with him, and this inhumu — Krait — sides with Horn against his own kind when the lander brings them to Green. Horn comes to think of him as a son, and Krait's death in the jungles haunts Horn throughout the rest of his travels. While in Gaon, Horn frees some imprisoned inhumi to fight for the town, and one of these becomes another companion, whom he treats as a daughter.

In a sense, *The Book of the Short Sun* could be seen as the story of the inhumi as much as the story of Horn, for they present the most urgent moral problem of the story, and Horn's regard for them is the clearest illustration of the hard-won goodness of his character. Toward the end of *Return to the Whorl*, one of Horn's biological sons, Hoof, says of him, "Father knew exactly how bad we were but he loved us just the same." Horn's love of the inhumi is his greatest challenge, and thus his greatest accomplishment.

Little or nothing is an accident in Gene Wolfe's writing, and the catechistic echo in Hoof's comment simply confirms the centrality of religious themes in *The Book of the Short Sun*. Not even the Christological overtones of *The Book of the New Sun* approach the overt meditations on ethics, the spirit, truth, redemption, and God that pervade this later series. At one point during his time in the old Whorl, Horn performs an impromptu ritual of sacrifice which, for reasons far too complex to explain here, explicitly recalls the sacrament of the Eucharist in Roman Catholic practice. "This is my body," he says of the bread he cuts. "This is my blood," of the wine. It doesn't get any clearer than that, and it is a further measure of Wolfe's talents that he can merge the traditionally incompatible idioms of religion and sf so smoothly that the combination feels most effortless.

I have spent the last twenty years thinking of *The Book of the New Sun* as the finest work of sf ever produced. I don't believe that *The Book of the Short Sun* surpasses it in that context. I don't know if anything can outdo *The Shadow of the Torturer* for sheer wonderment and strangeness, or its suffering young protagonist Severian as the exemplar of sf's redeeming hero. But Horn is an adult, where Severian is a boy, and Horn's story plumbs caverns of sorrow, hope, grief, and guilt that only exist in a person of deeper years. *The*

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Book of the Short Sun is a tale of personal redemption, not cosmic, and as such, it is not so fine an sf novel as *The Book of the New Sun*. But it may be the finer novel overall. ☙

"When did they give up their pitchforks?"

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Our good friend Kedrigern, the clever (and sometimes curmudgeonly) wizard, hasn't been seen much around these parts lately. Life with Princess and Spot keeps him busy, no doubt. But at last we've got a new adventure of his, courtesy of John Morressy, and it's well worth the wait.

There are rumors afoot—neither confirmed nor denied—that a complete collection of Kedrigern's capers may soon be published. But first, the wizard will have to reckon with Prince Bondo.

About Face

By John Morressy

At fifty, everyone has the face he deserves.
— George Orwell

I can't wait that long.
— Prince Bondo

WHEN PRINCESS LEFT FOR an extended visit with her sister, Kedrigern told himself that this would be the perfect opportunity to straighten up his workroom, organize his bookshelves, read a thick chronicle that he had been intending to tackle for a long time, and pursue his research into several complex counterspells that he wished to add to his repertoire. Avoiding a journey was in itself enough to fill him with good cheer. A few weeks of solitary study and contemplation in cozy familiar surroundings — a temporary flashback to bachelor days — was sure to refresh and renew his professional skills and make a new wizard of him. Loneliness would not be a problem; he would be far too busy to be lonely.

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So he thought. Instead, he found himself rattling around like a dried pea in a suit of armor. His little cottage felt as if it had swelled to ten times its normal size and been rendered silent as a midwinter midnight. It was suddenly too big, too quiet, and much too empty ever to have been a comfortable home. Without Princess, it was merely a shelter from the elements.

To add to his discomfort, he was forced to do his own cooking and housekeeping. At his insistence, Spot had accompanied Princess as guard, servant, and troll-of-all-work. Kedrigern had lightly declared that he was quite capable of managing for himself for a few months, thank you. He soon learned, forcefully, that cuisine was not his forte, that he was as inept with broom and dustpan as he was with pot and skillet, and that laundry was a deeper mystery than bilocation. There was always magic, of course, and when after only one week on his own the cottage came to resemble an ogre's cave he fell back on a tidying spell that put everything in order in an instant; but he felt guilty for days afterward. This was self-indulgence of the worst kind. One of the first precepts he had learned as a young apprentice was that magic is not a convenience to be squandered in making life comfortable, it is a tricky and demanding force to be employed only when necessary, and then with caution and prudence.

His sole consolation, at once painful and gratifying, was that he missed Princess more than he had ever thought possible. Her daily presence was as essential to his happiness and well-being as Spot's ministrations were to their joint comfort.

He missed Spot, too. The little troll had become an important — almost an essential — part of the household.

All these things became plain to him soon after their departure. The prospect of the solitary months ahead, a succession of dreary days and leaden hours, was brightened only by the hope that Princess missed him as much as he did her. As for Spot's feelings, there was no telling; trolls were inscrutable.

Under these trying circumstances, he was overjoyed to hear one morning the sound of hoofbeats and the firm knock of a determined visitor. He dashed to the door and welcomed a dusty, mud-splattered stranger with a warmth and enthusiasm that would have astonished anyone who knew him well.

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"I bring a missive for the wizard Kedrigern," said his caller.

"I'm the one you seek," the wizard said, plucking the sealed scroll from the man's hand. "Come in, come in, my good fellow. Make yourself comfortable. Travel's a wearisome business."

"My mission is urgent, Master Kedrigern."

"I'll get right to it," said the wizard as he led the way inside. He broke the seals and read the brief plea to attend the messenger's master on a personal matter of great importance. The nature of the matter was not disclosed, but the words *personal* and *great importance* were heavily underscored. The message concluded with the words "Fee no object," a phrase that never failed to stimulate his interest, though on this occasion it served purely as lagniappe. He was eager to get to work.

The bold signature read "Prince Bondo the Unseen." The name was unfamiliar. As much for the man's company as for his information, Kedrigern invited the messenger to join him in a light collation and a goblet of wine. Servants, he had learned, grew confiding over meat and drink.

Tullister, the messenger, was a portly, red-faced man with a genial manner and a heroic appetite. Between them they finished a loaf of bread, a cold meat pie, a few sausages, and a dish of figs, and sat back replete over a bowl of nuts. In the course of the meal Tullister gratefully downed three generous goblets of wine from the vineyards of Vosconu the Openhanded, one of the wizard's grateful clients. Kedrigern wisely abstained after a few polite sips from his first goblet, desirous of hearing — and accurately remembering — a full account of Prince Bondo and his urgent affair from a relaxed and, he hoped, garrulous Tullister.

He learned less than he had hoped to learn. Prince Bondo, the messenger confided, had long labored under an affliction that baffled the best minds in the medical and magical worlds. To no avail, he had sought help in every quarter. Fur-clad shamans from the snowy northern wastes, turbaned mages from remote eastern kingdoms, learned doctors from the universities bordering the Great Southern Sea, legendary wizards from lonely towers in the west: all had come to his aid, employed their skills, and departed shaking their heads dolefully when their best efforts proved fruitless. In desperation, Bondo had even sunk to consulting an alchemist, who filled his palace with unpleasant odors and his ears with gibberish,

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accomplished nothing, and demanded a purse of gold for his nugatory services. The prince was losing hope.

"Pity he didn't come to me sooner," said Kedrigern. He was miffed to think that his name had not headed the list.

"Oh, but he tried, Master Kedrigern. You were his first choice. But every time his messengers arrived, you were on a quest."

"Couldn't they leave a message?"

"They did, they did! An explanation in full, on parchment, in elegant book-hand, was affixed to the door each time."

"I never saw one."

"I delivered two of them myself. I rolled them tightly in soft leather to protect them from the elements, tied the ends with waxed cord, and hung them from the knocker."

Kedrigern groaned and bowed his head in distressed enlightenment. Obviously, Spot had mistaken the messages for sausages, and eaten them. A voracious and unselective appetite was one of his house-troll's few shortcomings. Looking up, he said, "Tell me, then: what, exactly, is the prince's problem?"

Tullister's cheeks turned perceptibly less rosy. He licked his lips and glanced around the kitchen nervously. "Well, now, Master Kedrigern, it's a hard thing to discuss. The prince is very sensitive about it. He's a good man — a fine man, never a better — but he is a bit sensitive about...about his condition. And who wouldn't be, in his place, I ask you?"

"And why should he be, I ask you?"

Fidgeting, glancing desperately in the corners of the room as if seeking sanctuary, Tullister said, "So you do, so you do. And you have every right, Master Kedrigern. Here I am, bursting in on you, asking you to lay aside your work and leave your lovely home to travel a long — "

Kedrigern broke in with a voice like a dagger of ice. "Tullister, what is the prince's problem?"

Tullister gripped the edge of the table with both hands and braced himself to speak. Fixing his gaze on the tabletop, he said in a low voice, "He is not handsome."

Kedrigern waited for elaboration. It did not come. At last he said, "Is that the whole problem?"

"For a prince, it's a serious matter, Master Kedrigern. A prince is

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expected to be handsome. People can be very disagreeable when they find he's not."

"I suppose some react badly, but still...."

"In every other respect, my master is a true prince, an outstanding prince. But he is not pleasant to look at."

Kedrigern felt this commission slipping away. Better endure a few weeks' loneliness than leave his home and travel dusty roads merely to cater to a foolish prince's vanity. With a stern countenance, he said, "A great many princes are not pleasant to look at, Tullister. They do not require wizardly assistance. They solve their problems with the help of a good barber and a clever tailor. They learn the improving effects of subdued lighting. Many of them surround themselves with flatterers and never suspect that they are not paragons of manly beauty."

"Prince Bondo abhors flatterers. He has tried two dozen barbers and threescore tailors, all of them highly recommended. They were no help. He is splendidly attired and elegantly groomed, but he is still unhandsome, even in semi-darkness."

"My good fellow, I sympathize. But I am not a beautician."

Tullister's eyes lit up in triumph. He beamed. "No, you are a wizard famous for your counterspells and disenchantments! And Prince Bondo's plight is the result of a wicked spell!" he cried.

Kedrigern threw up his hands in a eureka gesture and beamed on his visitor. "Why didn't you say so right away?" Rising, he said, "Pack up whatever's left in the larder. I'll get my books. We leave within the hour."

The trip to Ma Cachètte, Prince Bondo's remote palace, was long but pleasant, almost enjoyable. The prince's name secured them the choicest accommodations at the inns along the way, and the countryside at this time of year was at its most picturesque, softening Kedrigern's deep-seated loathing for travel in all forms.

Good as the journey was, their arrival was the high point. Ma Cachette was a vision of grace and elegance. Set high on a peak, gleaming white in the light of midday, crowned with soaring towers, bright with fluttering pennants, it impressed Kedrigern as just the sort of palace that Princess would love to visit.

The nearer they approached, the more exquisite became their

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surroundings. They rode up a gently winding road flanked by banks of bright flowers and neat arbors and swept with fragrant breezes, crossed a gaily painted drawbridge, and entered a spacious and astonishingly clean courtyard. Oh, yes, thought the wizard, this palace is definitely suited to Princess's taste. A pity she's not here to enjoy it.

"Your master has a lovely place here, Tullister," he said.

"He likes to surround himself with...." Here Tullister paused and heaved a deep sigh. "Beautiful things."

Servants flocked around them to relieve the wizard of his saddlebags and books and heavy traveling cloak. Once within the palace, he was ushered to a sunny chamber in the South Tower. A bowl of scented water was placed before him, so that he might wash off the dust of the road and meet the prince refreshed. All in all, Kedrigern considered this the sort of welcome he deserved, but did not always receive.

He had just finished washing when a servant came to his chamber to announce that Prince Bondo was eagerly awaiting him in the great hall. This was the kind of client Kedrigern liked: a man who got directly down to the matter at hand, and did not keep a wizard waiting. Straightening his tunic, flicking a bit of dust from his sleeve, he told the servant, "Lead on."

His first glimpse of his host, as he descended the steps to the great hall, surprised him. Prince Bondo stood before the fire, his back to Kedrigern. A hood was drawn over his head. His shoulders were broad, his waist narrow, his carriage erect. His clothing fit without a wrinkle, and his boots gleamed with reflected firelight. He looked the part of a true prince.

He turned to greet the wizard, his face concealed in the shadow of the hood, which was drawn well forward. He opened his arms in a gesture of welcome. "Master Kedrigern! We meet at last!" he said. His voice was melodious and sweet and resonant as golden bells pealing over a sea of nectar. It was the most marvelous voice the wizard had ever heard: manly, yet gentle; commanding, yet friendly; welcoming, yet majestic. And then Bondo pushed back the hood.

In the course of his professional duties, Kedrigern had seen ugliness in many forms. Demons, ogres, trolls, ghouls, and other beings notorious for their hideousness had left him unfazed. Prince Bondo came very close to fazing him. He was the ugliest human being the wizard had ever seen, or expected to see. He was, in all likelihood, the ugliest man in the world.

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His ugliness had a kind of repellent magnificence. Every feature was ugly. From the neck down, Prince Bondo was a superb physical specimen: tall, but not too tall; lean, but well-muscled and quick and dexterous in his movements. His proportions were perfect, his clothes elegantly cut — he was, after all, a prince — but his face was an abomination. Then Kedrigern relaxed and smiled. Surely, he told himself, this is a mask, and a superbly made one, at that.

Even as he smiled, he knew in his heart that it was not a mask. Prince Bondo was every bit as ugly as he looked. In a good light, maybe uglier.

"Yes, I'm real," said the prince. "This is the way I look. My parents incurred the wrath of a wicked fairy, and she took it out on their firstborn son, who happened to be me."

"Whatever did they do?"

"They failed to invite her to my christening. She felt snubbed."

Kedrigern groaned and shook his head in exasperation. It sometimes seemed to him that half the trouble in the world was caused by carelessness about royal invitations, the other half by the touchiness of wicked fairies. One really had a right to expect more of such people.

"I'll put my hood back up, if you prefer. I know how unpleasant it must be to look at me," said the Prince.

"No, no, Prince. If we're going to work together, I must observe the situation. What measures have been taken so far? I assume you've tried magic."

"I have engaged wizards of great repute. All have failed. The first to attempt to help me was turned into a newt. He may still be seen around the moat. The next two went mad. The fourth fled in the middle of the night, leaving his belongings behind. Those who followed were more cautious. They eschewed spells and tried immersions, fumigations, potions, lotions, unctions, salves, decoctions, infusions, electuaries, powders, and pills, all to no effect. In desperation, I summoned an alchemist, but quickly dismissed him. He was a charlatan."

"They all are."

"The last wizard took a bold and unorthodox approach. His assistant recited an ugliness spell and he simultaneously recited a counterspell while I was seated midway between them."

Kedrigern's brows rose. "That's innovative. What happened?"

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"There was an explosion, and the wizard, his assistant, and the north tower vanished. I was left seated alone on a fragment of flagstone with a splitting headache. My ears rang for days, and as you see...."

Kedrigern nodded. "They failed."

"I was fortunate in one respect. My parents had many friends among the good fairies, and they all received invitations. They could not undo the ugliness spell, but they did what they could to atone for what they considered their wicked sister's overreaction. They gave me charming manners, a beautiful voice, and every social grace, as well as a superior intellect. My study of Parmenides and the development of logic is hailed by philosophers of every school, and my notes on Aristotle's *Politics* are studied by rulers from Albion to Cathay. I'm a brilliant poet, a superb artist, a gifted musician, a marvelous dancer, the finest swordsman in the land, a horseman without compare, kind, courteous, bold, pious, clean, loyal, a defender of the weak, protector of the fair, generous to the needy, courteous to ladies, convivial among men, brave as a lion and — while they lived — devoted to my parents. But I'm ugly, and I grow uglier with each passing year. If I'm to continue the family name I must win the heart of some beautiful princess, but in my present condition I daren't even invite one to come and take a look at me."

"But surely, with such attributes...."

Bondo silenced him with a gentle gesture and a melancholy shake of the head. "I am also humble. I cannot persuade myself that one as ugly as I might be worthy of the attentions of a beautiful princess."

"What about a mask? I know an excellent maskmaker — "

Prince Bondo cut him off with a gesture. "The spell took that possibility into account. When I don a mask, however handsome it may be, it begins to show signs of plainness within a quarter of an hour. In half an hour, it is distinctly homely. By the end of an hour, it is ugly, and growing steadily uglier. I have a chestful of hideous masks packed away in a cellar somewhere, getting uglier and uglier. No, a mask is not the solution."

Kedrigern scratched his head and stared into the fire. This was one of the most accomplished spells he had ever encountered.

"Do you know the name of the fairy who placed the spell?" he asked.

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"Had we known her name, she would have been invited to the christening, and none of this would have taken place."

"True, true. Do you recall her words?"

"Alas, I do not. Since I was only three weeks old at the time, I paid little attention to the proceedings, and all else who were present are..." He lowered his voice, "...no longer among us. All I know for certain is that she cast a spell to make me the ugliest man in the world."

"Surely the good fairies...?"

"They were recalled to Fairyland shortly after the incident, and have not been seen since."

Kedrigern responded with a sympathetic nod. "Fairies are never around when you need them. They're not much for explaining, in any case. They assume that whatever they do is correct, and no explanation is needed. Now elves, on the other hand...but there's no point in going into that."

"No, no point...." The prince's glorious voice sank to a whisper. He stared in silence at the cold flagstones, and then he suddenly held out his arms in appeal and cried, "Help me, wizard, I implore you!" Abandoning all reserve, he clasped Kedrigern's hand in a desperate grip. "You are my last hope! You must remove the spell! I can endure this loneliness no longer!"

Kedrigern was touched to the heart. He had learned the pain of loneliness in the past few weeks, and his sympathies went out to the prince. Patting Bondo on the shoulder, he said, "I'll do my best. But you mustn't be so negative. Things could be worse. You've got a lovely palace, and you're a man of considerable gifts and talents. Why, I once knew a princess who was so — "

"I'm ugly! Ugly, alone, shunned, despised," the prince howled. "What good is the praise and adulation of distant strangers? I am forced to live with no friends, no companions, no hope!" He flung himself away from the wizard and began to pace before the fire. "I am young, wizard, and the last of my long and distinguished line. Where am I to find a wife? No woman has ever looked on me with favor. Even my mother, a saintly woman, the soul of kindness, a veritable fountain of maternal love, grew ill whenever she looked at me. I have heard on good authority that the companionship of a beautiful woman is a very pleasant experience. I

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desire to know that experience. But how am I to enjoy it when women scream and retch at the sight of me?"

That was a hard question to answer. Made sensitive to the pangs of loneliness by Princess's absence, swayed by Bondo's outburst, Kedrigern cast aside all caution.

"Prince Bondo," he declared, "you shall have the experience you desire. I will remove this curse."

The prince stopped pacing. "Really?"

"A wizard's promise, Prince."

"The spell is a powerful one," said Bondo, and Kedrigern caught the note of uncertainty in his splendid voice. "It may take you years. There may be danger."

"Danger? Years? Hah! I am the master of counterspells," said Kedrigern, with a snap of his fingers. "You may have every confidence."

"I do! I do! Master Kedrigern. For the first time in my life, I dare to hope!" Bondo laughed and did a brisk little dance before the hearth. "I feel light as a feather. I cannot be still. I will ride. One last ride through the comforting, concealing darkness, and soon I will ride in daylight forever more! To your work, wizard! We will meet tomorrow!" he cried as he strode to the door. A moment later he popped back in and called to the servants, "Master Kedrigern is to have whatever he requests. My kitchen, my wine cellars, my treasury, my musicians, my dwarfs and tumblers and singers, everything I possess is at his service. Attend him well!" and then he was gone.

The servants looked at Kedrigern in awe. After a time, one of them ventured to say in a hushed voice, "The prince has never before been so happy, honored master."

"He has not laughed since he was in the cradle," said a white-haired woman.

"And he has never before this spoken of riding out in broad daylight," added another.

"I trust he'll soon be even happier. You may bring a hearty dinner and a night's supply of candles to my chamber. I'm not to be disturbed by anyone but the prince, understand?" said Kedrigern, and set off to work.

At midnight he snuffed his candles, closed his book, and stretched out on his large comfortable bed, hands clasped behind his head, gazing at the

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play of the firelight on the ceiling and musing on the problem before him.

He was already having second thoughts.

It was not a question of removing the spell. He knew an infallible way of doing that this very night; but it involved dire consequences for the counterspeller, and no sensible wizard would attempt it. He meant to seek out a conventional solution.

It would not be easy. Undoing a spell of which the details were unknown — especially so powerful and complex a spell as this one — was a tricky business. One was liable to encounter all sorts of nasty backup spells designed expressly to do mischief to the counterspeller, the spellee, or both. Others already had.

Fortunately, he had plenty of time to seek the answer. And meanwhile, he would remain at Ma Cachette, enjoying the comforts of an elegant ménage, with a host of servants at his command.

In the morning he would arrange for word to be sent to Princess, that she might join him here when she left her sister's palace. A woman's point of view would be helpful in this situation. Once made handsome, Bondo would have to learn how to conduct himself in the presence of beautiful women, and Princess was an excellent teacher. And it would be a treat for her. She of all women was capable of appreciating the finest of food and drink, music and dancing and entertainment; here she would have them in abundance in lovely surroundings.

Except for courtiers, Prince Bondo led a lonely life. Reflecting on his own recent experience, Kedrigern gave a little shudder. Whatever it might take, he promised himself, this poor lad was going to be a handsome prince.

HE AROSE EARLY next morning, had a light breakfast brought to his chamber by a pair of servants, and sat down to his book once again chewing a fragment of muffin, leaving two for a midmorning snack. Scarcely had he begun checking the index when there was a pounding at the door and Bondo's magnificent voice shouted, "Wizard! Master Kedrigern! I must speak with you! I have news of great import!"

It was difficult to distinguish vocal nuances through a heavy oaken door, but the prince's voice definitely sounded exuberant. Kedrigern

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hurried to admit him, and Bondo burst into the chamber in a state of great excitement. He started to speak, made no sense at all, laughed, tried to speak once again, spluttered, pirouetted, and flung himself on the bed, where he tumbled into a backward somersault and rolled off the far side. He lay on the floor, laughing helplessly.

"The prince is in rare good spirits," Kedrigern observed.

Without rising, Bondo said, "The finest of spirits. This is the fairest of mornings. Last night was the most wonderful of nights. Everything is marvelous. You're here, and she's coming. You arrived at the very moment I need you most!" He bounded to his feet. "She's lovely! And you'll make me lovely. No, I mean beautiful. No, handsome," Bondo babbled, shaking his terrible head, laughing at his own confusion. "Yes, you will make me a handsome prince at last, and I will win the hand of the beautiful Princess Norimel!"

Kedrigern sensed a possible complication. "I think you'd better fill me in, Prince."

"I will. I must. Oh, wizard, this is a day of wonders! May I have a muffin?"

"Both, if you wish. But tell me what happened."

Bondo pushed the books aside and perched on the table, a muffin in his hand. "I have not eaten for nearly a day," he explained as he stuffed half of it into his mouth. When he had finished the other half, he said, "You will recall that I went riding after we spoke yesterday. I was beside myself with hope and joy, and rode where my steed took me, paying no heed to directions. I was on my favorite horse, Prestissimo, and he carried me far. When darkness fell, I was deep in an unfamiliar wood, far from Ma Cachette. I made my way eventually to the high road — a road I seldom travel, for fear of being seen — and thence to the borders of a neighboring nobleman, Lord Rook, with whom I have corresponded on matters of forestry and game management, though of course we have never met face-to-face.

"I paused to rest Prestissimo, and as we stood in the silence, on a rise overlooking the road, I heard the sound of a carriage approaching at great speed. I drew back into the shadows. Soon I could distinguish the sound of horsemen. A carriage which I recognized as Lord Rook's raced past below me. Close behind it came a band of robbers brandishing swords and closing fast.

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"A cry of terror came from the carriage. A woman's cry, wizard! My duty was clear. I swooped down on the pursuers, fought them off — there were no more than a dozen or so — and pulled abreast of the carriage to assure the lady of her safety." Bondo paused. He sighed, laid a hand on his heart, and with the other reached for the second muffin. "She is the niece of Lord Rook, come for a long visit. She is young. Unmarried. Oh, wizard. Oh, my dear, good, wizard," he said. He sighed and took a bite of muffin.

"Don't tell me. She was the most beautiful woman you've ever seen."

"Snnn? Hmh!" said Bondo, his voice muffled by the muffin. He gulped it down and went on, "Say rather, the most beautiful woman I have ever imagined."

Kedrigern nodded. "And she expressed her gratitude in lofty terms."

"She called me her rescuer. Her deliverer. Her beautiful hero! I, the ugliest of men, am her beautiful hero! Of course, I kept my face concealed."

"It sounds as though you had a very good evening. Will you be meeting the lady again?"

"She and Lord Rook will be my guests at Ma Cachette in three days' time. By then, thanks to you, I shall be a handsome prince — her handsome prince — and I shall ask for her hand. And if she accepts, we will wed before the month is out."

Kedrigern's brows went up. "Three days' time? You expect me to undo a spell that has defied masters of every art and science in *three days' time*? Prince Bondo, you ask the impossible."

"But I have offered the invitation!"

"Then postpone it. Say there's a leak in the moat. An outbreak of plague among the kitchen staff. An invasion. If she's truly smitten, she will understand."

"But what about me? I am truly smitten, and after being alone and ugly all my life, I can barely force myself to wait three days! You are the greatest counterspeller and disenchanter of all, are you not?"

"Yes. Of course. Ask anyone. But I never claimed to be the fastest."

Bondo stepped before the wizard and laid his hands on his shoulders in a brotherly gesture. "Then enhance your fame by adding speed to proficiency. I have absolute confidence in you, Master Kedrigern. Do this

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for me, and for my beloved Norimel, and you will be the most honored guest at our wedding. And afterward, you may name your reward."

Kedrigern sighed. The prospect of a leisurely pampered stay at Ma Cachette was being replaced by the certainty of a frenzied, sleepless search for the way to reverse an unknown spell by an unknown speller, probably buttressed with pitfalls of an unknown nature crafted to do in anyone silly enough to tamper with it. Three days. And one of them was halfway over.

On the other hand, Bondo would not be the only one to be relieved of his loneliness. A princely wedding would bring Princess here all the sooner. And it was a pleasing thing to be able to name one's own reward. A palace. A chest crammed with treasure. A picturesque province to rule wisely and well. Perhaps all of the above. And then some.

"Three days, you say?"

Prince Bondo favored him with a ghastly grimace that was probably meant to be a smile. "Three days from last night. At dinner time."

Kedrigern started to roll back his sleeves. "Then leave me. I'll call you when I'm ready."

"And what must I do, wizard?"

"Prepare for your guests. Brush up on your dancing. Compose a few love poems. Tune your lute. Just don't let anyone interrupt me."

"It shall be as you wish," Bondo said. He turned to leave, then stopped and asked, "Is there anything more?"

"Yes. Have Tullister deliver a message to my wife." Kedrigern paused for effect, then added with a confident smile, "An invitation to your wedding — before the month is out." It was a bold gesture, made more for Bondo's sake than for his own, and he regretted his braggadocio as soon as the words were out of his mouth. This was not going to be an easy job. But what was done was done. It was time to get to work.

As the sun sank on the third day, Kedrigern sat slumped over his books. He rubbed his red-rimmed eyes and gazed gloomily and sleepily into the dark corner of the chamber. He was at the end of his rope.

Granted that the prince's expectations were unrealistic and his deadline unreasonable, this debacle, Kedrigern told himself, was no one's fault but his own. A sensible wizard would have promised to do his best,

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try his hardest, make every effort — but first of all, he would have counseled patience. Lots of it, and no deadlines. And he would never, never, have guaranteed results in three days.

But not Kedrigern. Oh, no. Not the Master of Counterspells. Hah. Master of vanity, that's what he was. And Pride. Ego. Greed.

In three days, he had not found the faintest hint of a counterspell for a spell of such potency. There remained only the last-ditch spell, with its uncertain consequences. He did not want to think of that. He went to the window and stared out at the sky, darkening now, as were his hopes.

The sun was down. The dinner hour was rapidly approaching. His time was almost up. He went to the basin of water by his bed and plunged his face into it to purge the fuzziness of fatigue, then he took up his private notebook containing all the tips, hints, and special techniques he had gathered in a lifetime, hoping pathetically to find in one last search something he had overlooked. On the notebook's very first page were the admonitions of his old master Tarrendine, copied out long ago.

Speak a spell clearly and distinctly, and don't let your mind wander. Never spell in anger.

Don't overspell; use enough magic to get the job done, but not a bit more.

When you make a promise, keep it.

He wished that Tarry had added to that last counsel *So don't make rash promises, dummy.*

He sat staring bleakly at the page, remembering happier times. Tarry's lessons came back to him. He could almost hear the old man's words, his blunt, profound advice. What would Tarry have done in this situation?

The answer was simple: Tarry would not have gotten into it. But if he had, he would have given his all for Prince Bondo.

There was no way out. He had to use the last chance spell, with all its potential for disaster.

A soft knock roused him from his reverie. He sighed, rose, and went to the door. Prince Bondo slipped into the chamber.

"Do you have the cure?" he asked. "Norimel arrives within the hour. If you cannot make me worthy of her devotion, I will die of loneliness, heartbreak, and despair."

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"I have just one question. The fairy spell was that you'd be the ugliest man in the world — is that right?"

"I should think that's obvious."

"Don't get touchy. I want to know her exact words."

"Those were her words, as nearly as anyone remembered them."

"All right. I'll start now."

"What must I do?" the prince asked.

"Just sit quietly over there. Whatever happens, don't interrupt me."

Kedrigern went to the table whereon lay a thick black book. He opened it to a certain page, then opened another, smaller book and placed it by the side of the first. Taking a deep breath, he began to recite in a harsh tongue unfamiliar to Bondo.

The sun was down now. The only illumination in the room was the soft glow of the fire and the light of the candles on either side of the book. It was some time before Kedrigern heard the first shocked gasp from the prince. He proceeded with the spell, and when he was done, he turned to Bondo.

"How do I look?"

"You are...ugly. Very ugly," said Bondo. He sounded astonished.

"Good." Turning his attention to the second book, which contained an intensifying spell, Kedrigern began to read, this time in a different language, marked by clicks and gargling sounds. When the spell was complete, he said, "Well?"

"You are every bit as ugly as I," said Bondo. He shuddered and made a gagging sound. "I have never seen a more hideous creature. Not even in a mirror."

"I'm nearly done," Kedrigern said. He reached for a long, slender book bound in mottled green, leafed through the pages, and laid it before him. "You needn't look, if it bothers you," he said.

Without a word, Bondo turned his chair to face the wall.

When he had finished reciting the spell from the green book in a soft hissing voice, Kedrigern said, "Take a look at me, Prince Bondo. How do I compare to you?"

Bondo turned, and at a glimpse of the wizard he let out a cry of horror and loathing. He leaped up, knocking the chair aside, and covering his face with his hands, turned to the wall. In a muffled voice, he moaned, "Ghastly! Horrible, horrible!"

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"Are you still the ugliest man in the world?"

"No! You are, beyond all doubt! You're the ugliest creature in the universe!" the prince moaned.

A burst of light filled the chamber, like a flash of confined lightning, and left Kedrigern blinking. When his vision cleared, he could see motes of fairy dust settling slowly to the floor, where they disappeared. Bondo, still huddled against the wall, said softly, "Is it all right to look?"

"Don't look at me. Look at yourself," Kedrigern said.

"I don't carry a mirror."

"Look in my water basin."

"Do I dare? Am I handsome now?" Bondo asked.

"Just let me explain the charm, and then you can — "

Bondo slumped. "I'm still ugly. Is that what you're trying to tell me?"

"Take this candle and look at yourself. I'll explain later."

Bondo accepted the candle, leaned over the basin, and gazed into it. For a long time he was silent. He turned his face from side to side, raised his chin and lowered it, moved closer and then away. At last he said, "After all these years of being the ugliest man on earth, at last I'm a handsome prince."

"That's right," said Kedrigern with what was intended to be an encouraging smile, but was a terrible sight.

"A genuine handsome prince," Bondo said.

"Uncommonly handsome, if I say so myself."

Bondo sighed. "A handsome prince. Just like the Red Prince of Brucklestone. And Grakkan the Ferocious. And Fraxi of the Fells, and Vlabb the Cruel, and every prince and princeling in the land." His voice fell. "Just one more...handsome...prince." He sighed once again, more deeply this time, and stepped to the window, where he stood silent, looking into the darkness.

"You don't sound as pleased as I thought you'd be."

"Oh, I'm pleased. Of course I'm pleased. Who wouldn't be? And I'm grateful. But it's such a change. And so very sudden. I've been ugly since infancy, I was an ugly child, I was an ugly youth. For a time, I was the ugliest man in the world. And now I'm just another handsome prince."

"Is that a problem?" Kedrigern asked.

"It's difficult to explain. I feel as though I've lost the one thing that made me special."

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"The thing that made you special is something that you've been trying all your life to get rid of."

"I know, I know." Bondo heaved one more deep sigh. "It's hard to give up being the best in the world at anything, even ugliness. There's a certain satisfaction in knowing that you're Number One."

"You didn't seem very satisfied before," Kedrigern said. He was beginning to lose patience. He had kept his word, at a terrible price, and now Bondo was showing signs of turning out to be — as he himself had phrased it — just another handsome prince.

While Kedrigern, now uglier than Bondo had ever been, was brooding over the ways of princes, Bondo surreptitiously peered into the basin for another, longer look at himself. Softly and appreciatively, he murmured, "Oh, my." He laughed aloud. "I'm beautiful!" he shouted.

"You certainly are. Now you'd better go and make sure everything is ready for your guests."

Bondo continued to gaze into the basin. "What? Oh, yes. Yes, of course. Guests. I suppose I'd better start thinking about wedding guests, too. You and your wife are invited, of course. And anyone you care to bring. And I'll ask...." He looked into the basin once more, lovingly. Then he gave a start and turned to the wizard in alarm, wincing and averting his eyes at once. "What about our children? Will they take after the handsome me or the hideous me?"

"If the spell was placed specifically on your parents' firstborn son, it won't affect descendants. They'll probably look like their mother, anyway. Children do that."

Bondo gave a sigh of relief and returned his attention to the basin. "I must be the handsomest prince in the world. I can't believe my eyes. But you...."

"Yes, I know. I think it's best that I don't join you at dinner."

"Definitely."

"I'll just stay in my room for a time."

"Good idea. How long will you look like...that?"

"It depends. You'd better go now."

"I'll have a lovely dinner sent up," Bondo said. "The servants will leave the tray outside the door."

So it was done. Bondo was a handsome prince, and his future looked

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rosy. Kedrigern's did not. The ugly spell he had placed on himself had one great drawback: it could be lifted only by one of power equal, or superior, to his own. Such people were few in number and widely scattered, and their talents were in great demand. Many of them were friends of his, but all of them were rivals, and one or two were definitely disinclined to help a competitor. A few might even take pleasure in prolonging Kedrigern's predicament. Princess might find herself living with the ugliest man in the world for a considerable time.

And what if she chose otherwise? What if she took one look at him and fled, weeping and shrieking in horror, never to return?

Surely she would not, not after all their years together. But what if she did? Kedrigern could not bring himself to blame her. She was the most beautiful of women; he was now a monster. She was loving, loyal, and true to the end, but this was an extreme provocation. He had not yet seen what he looked like, nor did he wish to. He knew. His workmanship was always first-rate. Perhaps he had cured Bondo's loneliness only at the cost of his own. Whatever his reward for such a service, it could not make up for the loss of Princess. Perhaps even of Spot. And they might both be on their way to Ma Cachette even now.

He was sitting with his hands over his monstrous face, sinking every moment deeper into despair, when he heard a soft sweet sound, like a glissando on an ethereal harp. He looked up and saw a diminutive woman hovering in the air before him, surrounded by a golden glow. She wore a glittering tiara and carried a wand that shone like a ray of sunshine. Her exquisite features bore an expression of alarm. Beyond doubt she was a fairy, and he suspected that she was the very one who had caused all Bondo's trouble, and had probably come to cause more, this time for the one who had undone her handiwork. He braced himself for the worst.

"Oh, you poor little man!" she cried. "I'm so terribly sorry! Here, let me make you all nice again." She darted forward and gently tapped Kedrigern's forehead with her wand.

He felt the dank weight of ugliness peel off like a wet dirty sock. He blinked and shook his head and looked at the tiny woman. "That was the most powerful ugly spell I know...doubled and redoubled...and you lifted it as if it were...nothing at all," he said. His voice was hushed in professional admiration.

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"The least I could do, Bondo dear. You're looking...." She checked herself, and silently circled his head for a closer look. "You're looking not at all like my Bondo."

"Madam, I am not Prince Bondo, I am Kedrigern of Silent Thunder Mountain. And I am grateful beyond words."

"But you must be Bondo! You were the ugliest man in the world!"

"The price I paid for lifting the spell from the prince."

"Then my little Bondo isn't ugly any more?"

"He is the handsomest of handsome princes."

She studied him for a long time, and then said, "I think you owe me an explanation."

Relieved — so relieved that he did not even sneak a quick look at himself — Kedrigern gave her a full account. When he was done, she said, "That was an excellent spell you put on yourself. You were absolutely repulsive."

"Thank you. I assumed that once Bondo was no longer the ugliest man in the world, the spell would end."

"Very astute of you. That was the only way to break it."

Kedrigern was always ready to learn, especially from someone of such manifest power and finesse. He said, "I had thought for a time of using a simpler method, a charm that would leave Bondo as ugly as ever but create the permanent illusion of handsomeness. Would that have helped?"

"No."

"What would have happened?" he asked.

"Something too terrible to relate."

He drew a long breath, let it out slowly, and was silent for a time. "I see. I'm terribly sorry to have interfered with your work, but Bondo was so unhappy that I couldn't refuse. He's met this young lady, you see, and — "

She silenced him with a flutter of her wand. "I know all about that. It's what brought me here."

"You don't intend to change him back, do you? That would be — "

"My dear wizard, you misjudge me grievously," she broke in. "What I did, I did for Bondo's own good. You don't know his family history."

"What does his family have to do with it?"

"Everything," said the fairy. She floated to the table and seated herself

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gracefully on the book of spells. "I am Tulagonda, First Princess of the Golden Fairies. I have long taken an interest in Bondo's family, a house famed equally for its beauty and its vanity. His father was Amnor the Arrogant. His mother was Valmalinda the Vain. They were puffed up with self-love, both of them; so much that they forgot old friends of the family and ignored the common courtesies of life."

"Like inviting you to Bondo's christening?"

"Among other things. But I forgave them."

"Then why — ?"

"Please don't interrupt. Bondo's maternal grandparents were the handsomest and most conceited man of his day and a princess known as 'Mirabelle of the Mirrors' because she was never known to do anything but admire herself. His paternal grandparents had similar habits. And so it went for generations back. The family had their good qualities, but their boundless self-love kept getting in the way. Bondo would have been the handsomest of the lot, and consequently thoroughly spoiled, insufferable, and worthless. I was determined to save him. By making him plain, I hoped — "

"Plain? You made him hideous!"

"I may have overdone it a bit," she said with a little impatient shake of her head. "But it was all for the best. By doing as I did, I forced all the other fairies into showering him with gifts that made him a model prince."

"And a very lonely one."

"His loneliness was about to end. I had a lovely lady picked out for him, exactly right for my Bondo in every way. But the poor mixed-up boy had to go and meet this other one. There was nothing for it but to come here and try to talk some sense into him."

"You can't, Tulagonda: he's too much in love."

"So it seems. At least you've saved me the bother of lifting the spell and doing a lot of explaining."

"Did you really come to lift the spell?"

"Of course. I'm not cruel, you know. Everything I did was in Bondo's best interest. Now I suppose he'll become the most vain and conceited of his line. Oh, these mortals," she said, with an exasperated twitch of her wand. "I'm beginning to think I should never have intervened. I'd be happy to find a way to clear up the whole matter once and for all."

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"I have just the thing," Kedrigern said. "But it will require powerful magic."

"You're speaking to the First Princess of the Golden Fairies, wizard. Magic is no object," said Tulagonda.

"What about all those wizards and the rest of them who tried to help Bondo? Are you going to help them?"

She chilled him with an indignant look. "Certainly not. Whatever happened to them is their own fault. They shouldn't have meddled in other people's private affairs."

Kedrigern thought it prudent to withhold comment.

BONDO'S JUBILANT cry of "I have news, wonderful news!" and his pounding on the door awakened Kedrigern from a deep sleep in the early hours of the morning.

"Norimel is mine! I am hers! We are ours!" the prince cried as he bounded into the darkened chamber. "The wedding is to be in three weeks! And I owe my happiness to you, wizard of wizards, master of counterspells, Kedrigern the Great!"

"Glad to hear it," said the wizard, yawning. He shuffled sleepily to the table and lit the candles.

Bondo did a double take and cried, "You are your old self!"

"And you are your new self, and a very handsome self it is," said Kedrigern, studying Bondo's firm jaw, deep-set piercing dark eyes, gleaming chestnut locks, and fine brow.

"Yes, isn't it? I must say, you do excellent work. Norimel was quite overwhelmed."

"I assume you'll be sending out invitations very shortly."

"The scribes are already at work."

"Whatever you do, make sure you invite a fairy named Tulagonda. Seat her in a place of honor. I don't want to have to do this again in another twenty years," said Kedrigern. "And now let me get some sleep."

The wedding took place exactly three weeks after Norimel's first visit to Ma Cachette. It was a grand occasion, and went on for ten days uninterrupted. Guests came from leagues around, and each of them was

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awed by the beauty of the bride, the handsomeness of the groom, and the splendor of the ceremonies.

Princess was, of course, an honored guest. A troop of guards had been dispatched to conduct her to Ma Cachette, where she was received with a formal salute and review. She had a splendid time, dancing with all the men — even Kedrigern — chatting with all the ladies, and being admired by everyone. Spot proved invaluable in moving heavy furniture and cleaning out the moat.

Kedrigern was not a man for festivities. He spent some time conferring with Tulagonda and much more avoiding guests who wanted advice about dealing with unsightly sons and daughters. By the middle of the third day, he was fidgeting. On the fifth, he complained about the noise, and by the end of the seventh was muttering about making everyone disappear. He did nothing of the sort, of course, but was relieved to start for home on the morning after the last great feast.

"They're a lovely couple. I'm sure they'll be happy," said Princess, as Ma Cachette vanished behind a hill.

"I haven't a doubt about it," said Kedrigern. "I saw you slip the love potion into their wine."

"Only a drop for each. They may never need it, but it doesn't hurt to make certain. I only wish I had something to keep Bondo humble and self-effacing. He's almost certain to become vain."

Kedrigern shook his head slowly, like a wise old sage. "Vanity won't be a problem with Bondo. Tulagonda and I have seen to that. I furnished the idea and she did the heavy magic."

"And what did you do?"

"Bondo plans to have new coins struck with his and Norimel's profiles on one side. And whether he likes it or not, the other side will bear the image of Bondo as he once was, and the words 'Remember me' in Latin. No matter what he tries to put on his coins, one side will always carry the picture of the Bondo that was. Tulagonda has seen to that. And it will appear on his coat of arms from now on, as his heraldic beast. And if you noticed the gargoyles on the palace walls...."

Princess gasped. "Did he look like *that*?"

"To the life."

"Oh, the poor prince. It must have been terrible."

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"It was, but a man easily forgets such things when he's the handsomest prince for leagues around. Now, every time he counts his gold, or displays his coat of arms, or looks up at the walls of Ma Cachette, Bondo will see a reminder of himself as he once was."

"It might be a shock."

"A salutary one. It's bad to be the ugliest man in the world, but it's not much of an improvement to become the most conceited."

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In the sporting world, Reggie Jackson might be "Mister October," but in the realm of entertainment, that title should go to Mr. B. With such classic tales as Something Wicked This Way Comes, Dark Carnival, The Halloween Tree, *and of course* The October Country, *Ray Bradbury has shaped our dreams and nightmares for more than fifty years. His latest novel,* From the Dust Returned, *takes us into the attics of the macabre Elliott family. His new story takes us out onto the links with very unsettling results.*

Fore!

By Ray Bradbury

THE SUN WAS GOING DOWN and in a few swift minutes it dipped below the horizon and the shadows came out from under all the trees, and one by one the golf-range practicers scabbarded their clubs, packed their golf balls, shucked their dark glasses and headed for the parking lot. When the sun was completely gone the cars had gone with it; the lot was empty, the driving range abandoned, or *almost* abandoned.

Glenn Foray was checking some figures on his computer in the small office behind the tee-off point when he heard it. Once, twice, three times.

Whack, whack, whack.

Good solid blows of a club against three balls.

That was not ordinary.

Glenn Foray glanced up.

To the far left of the range, situated on the tee with an old-fashioned niblick driver in hand, and his tartan cap pulled low on his brow, stood a now familiar figure, a man who had been in and out of the range for some

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years but now was bending to tee three more balls as if it must be done quickly. Then he straightened up, adjusted his club, and *whack, whack, whack* again.

Glenn Foray regarded the missing sun, the empty car lot with but two cars, his own, and this lone golfer's. He rose from his desk and went to stand in the doorway, watching.

The routine was repeated. One, two, three. Whack, whack, whack. The golfer was starting a third attack when Glenn Foray arrived to his right. The man seemed not to notice and drove the golf balls, one after another, far out on the green fairway.

Foray watched them sail, then said,

"Evening, Mr. Gingrich. Nice go."

"*Was* it? *Did* it?" Gingrich said, having ignored where the balls landed. "Well, yes. Sure. Evening. Quitting time?"

Foray waited as Gingrich placed three more. There was something in the man's face and the way his arm stretched and his knuckles clutched the missiles that stopped his agreement.

"Quitting time?" he said. "Not yet."

Gingrich stared at the golf balls on the new tees. "Glad to hear that. Just a few *more*?"

"Hell," said Foray quietly. "Take your time. I got some figures to add. Be here another half hour."

"Good news." Gingrich had a nice backswing and follow-through. One, two, three. "I know it's not your job. But could I have, oh, say, two or three more buckets?"

"No sweat." Foray turned, went, and brought back three more fully loaded golf ball carriers. "Here you go."

"Thanks," said Gingrich, still not looking up, shoving more tees in the turf. His cheeks were flushed, his eyes hot with a kind of sporting frenzy as if he were playing against himself and not happy. His fingers, thrust down, seemed flushed with color, too. "Very kind of you," he almost shouted.

Foray waited for three more solid cracks and three high-flying white balls before he backed off.

From the office doorway he watched Gingrich attack with an even more concerted energy, blow after blow, almost as if he were striking,

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what? a bad day at the office? a fellow golfer? a dishonest friend? Foray snorted at his own *one, two, three* hard-driven thoughts.

At his computer he tried to recall what he had been summing up, but still the solid blows came as the twilight set in and the night lamps switched on, flooding the empty fairway with light. It was late on a Sunday, the one night when the range closed early, and still the man with the angry eyes and the crimson face slammed the balls high and before they fell thrust more tees in place to empty the buckets.

By the time they were empty, Foray had carried two more full loads out, quietly, and set them down. Gingrich, seeing this as an act of friendship, nodded his thanks and continued his robot performance. *One, two, three, one, two, three, one —*

Foray did not move for a long while. At last he said, "Everything *okay*, Mr. Gingrich?"

Gingrich hit another three and then at last looked up. "What could *not* be okay?" he said.

And there were tears in his eyes.

Foray swallowed and could find no words until at last he said, looking at the crimsoned cheeks of the man and the fiery eyes, "As long as it's all okay, then. *Okay.*"

Gingrich nodded abruptly and lowered his head. A few clear drops of water fell from his eyes.

Foray said, "I just figured. It'll take me another forty minutes, an hour, to finish up. You can close the joint, with me."

"Fine. Damned fine," Gingrich said.

And clipped three clumps of grass and turf.

Foray felt the blows as if the club hit his midriff, they were that intense. The effect was like a film speeded up. No sooner were the balls up than they were gone. The air seemed full of white birds sailing in the night trees.

Foray kept rising to go to the doorway and stare out, taking the impacts, stunned with the progress of this lonely game.

"None of my business," he murmured, but still turned to his computer. He called up the index of frequent players: Galen, Gallager, Garnes.... Here it was.

Whack, whack, whack, in the twilight.

"Gingrich. William. 2344 Patricia Avenue, L.A. 90064. Mr. and Mrs.

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(Eleanor) Golf practice lessons early on. Repeat a few months ago. Steady customer." All the notes he had typed himself.

He looked out at the range and watched the man in his almost lunatic frenzy and wondered, do I bring more buckets, yes, no? He brought more buckets. This time, Gingrich did not even glance up or nod.

Foray, like a man walking underwater, for reasons he did not quite understand, moved out toward his open top roadster, listened to the constant knock, saw more white objects fly in a sky where the moon was slowly rising, and drove away.

What do I say? he thought. Mrs. Gingrich, come get your husband?

When he had parked in front of 2344 Patricia Avenue he looked in at the large Georgian house where some, not all, of the lights were lit. He saw shadows moving to one side in the windows. He heard distant music and dim sounds of laughter.

"To hell with this," he thought. "What's wrong with you? Fool!"

He stepped on the gas and started to glide away but in his head he heard the chopping sounds, one, two, *three*, and stopped and coasted the car back near the curb. He waited a long while, chewing his lower lip, cursing, and at last got out, stood swaying, and moved up the walk. He stood before the front door for another long minute listening to the soft voices inside and the music playing low, and at last touched the doorbell with almost as much force as the lone player thrusting in the tees. Silence. He rang again. More silence. One, two, *three. Three* thrusts. Three bell sounds, each louder.

He stopped and waited.

At long last the door opened and a woman's face appeared.

Her hair was tousled and her face was moist with a faint perspiration. Her eyes adjusted to his face and she said, "Yes?"

"Mrs. Gingrich?" Foray said.

"Yes?" she seemed confused, and glanced swiftly over her shoulder. In a far doorway, Foray saw the shadow of a man, or what seemed the shadow of a man.

"Yes?" she said again, quickly.

He swayed in place. One, two, three. Knock, knock, knock. Crack, crack, crack. No one else heard the sounds. He wet his lips, closed his eyes, opened them and for some reason said:

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"I'm Gingrich," he said.

"What?" she said, even more confused.

"Gingrich, William," he said, louder.

"You're not my husband!" she said.

"Yes," he said. "I am."

And hauled off and struck her in the mouth with his fist. As she held her lips with both hands, falling back, he cried, "And if you come out, you'll get the *same!*"

The shadow in the far door did not move. Foray turned and walked back underwater to the car and drove away.

At the driving range Gingrich was still hitting the white objects, striking the blows, mechanically, downswing, strike, downswing, crack, downswing, *bang!*

Foray appeared nearby with a golf bag full of clubs.

Gingrich paused and looked at the bag.

"What?" he said.

Foray said, "How about one last round?"

Gingrich looked at the open fairway to his left. A wire screen door opened there to the first tee.

"This late at night?" he said.

"It's never too late," said Foray. "I'll carry the clubs."

"I'll be damned," said Gingrich.

"Not if I can help it," said Foray.

Gingrich said, "We won't be able to see."

"We *will.*" Foray nodded at the sky.

A full moon was rising to light the long spreads and the low hills, the waiting sandtraps and the small lake. A wind rustled in the oak trees.

"I'll be damned," whispered Gingrich.

He let himself be led out the wire screen door to the first tee.

"You first," said Foray, and placed the ball and tee for him.

Gingrich watched, almost frozen.

When Foray stood back, Gingrich took steady aim, raised his club and brought it down like a blow of summer lightning. *Bam!*

He watched the ball fly like a lovely white bird up toward the moon and down toward the fairway green.

"Son of a bitch!" he cried.

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"Oh, oh," he cried again. "Son of a bitch!"

"Fore!" Foray shouted, though there was no one out there on the course to harm. Or maybe there *was* someone way out there, a shadow.

"Fore!" he said.

"Lousy life, true, but awesome web site. Go on in."

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James Morrow's winning novels include Only Begotten Daughter, This Is the Way the World Ends, Towing Jehovah, *and most recently,* The Eternal Footman. *He reports that he has finished a draft of his next novel,* The Last Witchfinder, *and jokes that he will continue rewriting it until he runs out of food. Some of his short fiction has been assembled in* Swatting at the Cosmos *and* Bible Stories for Adults, *but as yet, the majority of his short fiction remains uncollected.*

Here he adds to that oeuvre *with a witty work of science fiction in the tradition of H. G. Wells. (Amazing, isn't it, how pertinent Wells's science fiction remains after a full century!) "The Cat's Pajamas" was published first in* Embrace the Mutation, *a new anthology of stories that accompany the artwork of phantasmagoric photomontagist J. K. Potter.*

The Cat's Pajamas

By James Morrow

"All politics is local politics."

—Tip O'Neill

THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY Enlightenment was still in our faces, fetishizing the rational intellect and ramming technocracy down our throats, so one day I said to Vickie, "Screw it. This isn't for us. Let's hop in the car and drive to romanticism, or maybe even preindustrial paganism, or possibly all the way to hunter-gatherer utopianism." But we only got as far as Pennsylvania.

I knew that the idea of spending all summer on the road would appeal to Vickie. Most of her affections, including her unbridled *wanderlust*, are familiar to me. Not only had we lived together for six years, we also worked at the same New Jersey high school — Vickie teaching American history, me offering a souped-up eleventh-grade Humanities course — with the result that both our screaming matches and our flashes of rapport drew upon a fund of shared experiences. And so it was that the first day of

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summer vacation found us rattling down Route 80 in our decrepit VW bus, listening to Crash Test Dummies CDs and pretending that our impulsive westward flight somehow partook of political subversion, though we sensed it was really just an extended camping trip.

Despite being an *épater le bourgeois* sort of woman, Vickie had spent the previous two years promoting the idea of holy matrimony, an institution that has consistently failed to enchant me. Nevertheless, when we reached the Delaware Water Gap, I turned to her and said, "Here's a challenge for us. Let's see if we can't become man and wife by this time tomorrow afternoon." It's important, I feel, to suffuse a relationship with a certain level of unpredictability, if not outright caprice. "Vows, rings, music, all of it."

"You're crazy," she said, brightening. She's got a killer smile, sharp at the edges, luminous at the center. "It takes a week just to get the blood-test results."

"I was reading in *Newsweek* that there's a portable analyzer on the market. If we can find a technologically advanced justice of the peace, we'll meet the deadline with time to spare."

"Deadline?" She tightened her grip on the steering wheel. "Jeez, Blake, this isn't a *game*. We're talking about a *marriage*."

"It's a game and a gamble — I know from experience. But with you, sweetheart, I'm ready to bet the farm."

She laughed and said, "I love you."

We spent the night in a motel outside a pastoral Pennsylvania borough called Greenbriar, got up at ten, made distracted love, and began scanning the yellow pages for a properly outfitted magistrate. By noon we had our man, District Justice George Stratus, proud owner of a brand new Sorrel-130 blood analyzer. It so happened that Judge Stratus was something of a specialist in instant marriage. For a hundred dollars flat, he informed me over the phone, we could have "the nanosecond nuptial package," including blood test, license, certificate, and a bottle of Taylor's champagne. I told him it sounded like a bargain.

To get there, we had to drive down a sinuous band of dirt and gravel called Spring Valley Road, past the asparagus fields, apple orchards, and cow pastures of Pollifex Farm. We arrived in a billowing nimbus of dust.

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Judge Stratus turned out to be a fat and affable paragon of efficiency. He immediately set about pricking our fingers and feeding the blood to his Sorrel-130, which took only sixty seconds to endorse our DNA even as it acquitted us of venereal misadventures. He faxed the results to the county courthouse, signed the marriage certificate, and poured us each a glass of champagne. By three o'clock, Vickie and I were legally entitled to partake of connubial bliss.

I think Judge Stratus noticed my pained expression when I handed over the hundred dollars, because he suggested that if we were short on cash, we should stop by the farm and talk to Andre Pollifex. "He's always looking for asparagus pickers this time of year." In point of fact, my divorce from Irene had cost me plenty, making a shambles of both my bank account and my credit record, and Vickie's fondness for upper-middle-class counterculture artifacts, solar-powered trash compacters and so on, had depleted her resources as well. We had funds enough for the moment, though, so I told Stratus we probably wouldn't be joining the migrant worker pool before August.

"Well, sweetheart, we've done it," I said as we climbed back into the bus. "Mr. and Mrs. Blake Meeshaw."

"The price was certainly right," said Vickie, "even though the husband involved is a fixer-upper."

"You've got quite a few loose shingles yourself," I said.

"I'll be hammering and plastering all summer."

Although we had no plans to stop at Pollifex Farm, when we got there an enormous flock of sheep was crossing the road. Vickie hit the brakes just in time to avoid making mutton of a stray lamb, and we resigned ourselves to watching the woolly parade, which promised to be as dull as a passing freight train. Eventually a swarthy man appeared gripping a silver-tipped shepherd's crook. He advanced at a pronounced stoop, like a denizen of Dante's Purgatory balancing a millstone on his neck.

A full minute elapsed before Vickie and I realized that the sheep were moving in a loop, like wooden horses on a carousel. With an impatience bordering on hysteria, I leaped from the van and strode toward the obnoxious herdsman. What possible explanation could he offer for erecting this perpetual barricade?

Nearing the flock, I realized that the scene's strangest aspect was

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neither the grotesque shepherd nor the tautological roadblock, but the sheep themselves. Every third or fourth animal was a mutant, its head distinctly humanoid, though the facial features seemed melted together, as if they'd been cast in wax and abandoned to the summer sun. The sooner we were out of here, I decided, the better.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" I shouted. "Get these animals off the road!"

The shepherd hobbled up to me and pulled a tranquilizer pistol from his belt with a manifest intention of rendering me unconscious.

"Welcome to Pollifex Farm," he said.

The gun went off, the dart found my chest, and the world turned black.

REGAINING consciousness, I discovered than someone — the violent shepherd? Andre Pollifex? — had relocated my assaulted self to a small bright room perhaps twelve feet square. Dust motes rode the sunlit air. Sections of yellow wallpaper buckled outward from the sheetrock like spritsails puffed with wind. I lay on a mildewed mattress, elevated by a box-spring framed in steel. A turban of bandages encircled my head. Beside me stood a second bed, as uninviting as my own, its bare mattress littered with artifacts that I soon recognized as Vickie's — comb, hand mirror, travel alarm, ankh earrings, well-thumbed paperback of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance.*

It took me at least five minutes, perhaps as many as ten, before I realized that my brain had been removed from my cranium and that the pink, throbbing, convoluted mass of tissue on the nearby customized library cart was in fact my own thinking apparatus. Disturbing and unorthodox as this arrangement was, I could not deny its actuality. Every time I tapped my skull, a hollow sound came forth, as if I were knocking on an empty casserole dish. Fortunately, the physicians responsible for my condition had worked hard to guarantee that it would entail no functional deficits. Not only was my brain protected by a large plexiglass jar filled with a clear, acrid fluid, it also retained its normal connection to my heart and spinal cord. A ropy mass of neurons, interlaced with augmentations of my jugular vein and my two carotid arteries, extended

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from beneath my orphaned medulla and stretched across four feet of empty space before disappearing into my reopened fontanel, the whole arrangement shielded from microbial contamination by a flexible plastic tube. I was thankful for my surgeons' conscientiousness, but also — I don't mind telling you — extremely frightened and upset.

My brain's extramural location naturally complicated the procedure, but in a matter of minutes I managed to transport both myself and the library cart into the next room, an unappointed parlor bedecked in cobwebs, and from there to an enclosed porch, all the while calling Vickie's name. She didn't answer. I opened the door and shuffled into the putrid air of Pollifex Farm. Everywhere I turned, disorder prospered. The cottage in which I'd awoken seemed ready to collapse under its own weight. The adjacent windmill canted more radically than Pisa's Leaning Tower. Scabs of leprous white paint mottled the sides of the main farmhouse. No building was without its unhinged door, its shattered window, its sunken roof, its disintegrating wall — a hundred instances of entropy mirroring the biological derangement that lay within.

I did not linger in the stables, home to six human-headed horses. Until this moment, I had thought the centaurial form intrinsically beautiful, but with their bony backs and twisted faces these monsters soon deprived me of that supposition. Nor did I remain long in the chicken coop, habitat of four gigantic human-headed hens, each the size of a German shepherd. Nor did the pig shed detain me, for seven human-headed hogs is not a spectacle that improves upon contemplation. Instead I hurried toward an immense barn, lured by a spirited performance of Tschaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1 wafting through a crooked doorway right out of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*.

Cautiously I entered. Spacious and high-roofed, the barn was a kind of agrarian cathedral, the Chartres of animal husbandry. In the far corner, hunched over a baby grand piano, sat a humanoid bull: blunt nose, gaping nostrils, a long tapering horn projecting from either side of his head. Whereas his hind legs were of the bovine variety, his forelegs ended in a pair of human hands that skated gracefully along the keyboard. He shared his bench with my wife, and even at this distance I could see that the bull man's virtuosity had brought her to the brink of rapture.

Cerebrum in tow, I made my way across the barn. With each step, my

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apprehension deepened, my confusion increased, and my anger toward Vickie intensified. Apprehension, confusion, anger: while I was not yet accustomed to experiencing such sensations in a location other than my head, the phenomenon now seemed less peculiar than when I'd first returned to sentience.

"I know what you're thinking," said Vickie, acknowledging my presence. "Why am I sitting here when I should be helping you recover from the operation? Please believe me: Karl said the anesthesia wouldn't wear off for another four hours."

She proceeded to explain that Karl was the shepherd who'd tranquilized me on the road, subsequently convincing her to follow him onto the farm rather than suffer the identical fate. But Karl's name was the least of what Vickie had learned during the past forty-eight hours. Our present difficulties, she elaborated, traced to the VD screening we'd received on Wednesday. In exchange for a substantial payment, Judge Stratus had promised to alert his patrons at Pollifex Farm the instant he happened upon a blood sample bearing the deoxyribonucleic acid component known as QZ-11-4. Once in possession of this gene — or, more specifically, once in possession of a human brain whose *in utero* maturation had been influenced by this gene — Dr. Pollifex's biological investigations could go forward.

"Oh, Blake, they're doing absolutely *wonderful* work here." Vickie rose from the bench, came toward me, and, taking care not to become entangled in my spinal cord, gave me a mildly concupiscent hug. "An external brain to go with your external genitalia — very sexy."

"Stop talking nonsense, Vickie!" I said. "I've been *mutilated!*"

She stroked my bandaged forehead and said, "Once you hear the whole story, you'll realize that your bilateral hemispherectomy serves a greater good."

"Call me Maxwell," said the bull man, lifting his fingers from the keyboard. "Maxwell Taurus." His voice reminded me of Charles Laughton's. "I must congratulate you on your choice of marriage partner, Blake. Vickie has a refreshingly open mind."

"And I have a depressingly vacant skull," I replied. "Take me to this lunatic Pollifex so I can get my brain put back where it belongs."

"The doctor would never agree to that." Maxwell fixed me with his

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stare, his eyes all wet and brown like newly created caramel apples. "He requires round-the-clock access to your anterior cortex."

A flock of human-headed geese fluttered into the barn, raced toward a battered aluminum trough full of grain, and began to eat. Unlike Maxwell, the geese did not possess the power of speech — either that, or they simply had nothing to say to each other.

I sighed and leaned against my library cart. "So what, exactly, does QZ-11-4 *do*?"

"Dr. Pollifex calls it the integrity gene, wellspring of decency, empathy, and compassionate foresight," said Maxwell. "Francis of Assisi had it. So did Charles Darwin, Clara Barton, Mahatma Gandhi, Florence Nightingale, Albert Schweitzer, and Susan B. Anthony. And now — now that Dr. Pollifex has started injecting me with a serum derived from your hypertrophic superego — now *I've* got it too."

Although my vanity took a certain satisfaction in Maxwell's words, I realized that I'd lost the thread of his logic. "At the risk of sounding disingenuously modest, I'd have to say I'm not a particularly ethical individual."

"Even if a person inherits QZ-11-4, it doesn't necessarily enjoy expression. And even if the gene enjoys expression — " Maxwell offered me a semantically freighted stare — "the beneficiary doesn't always learn to use his talent. Indeed, among Dr. Pollifex's earliest discoveries was the fact that complete QZ-11-4 actualization is impossible in a purely human species. The serum — we call it Altruoid — the serum reliably engenders ethical superiority only in people who've been genetically melded with domesticated birds and mammals."

"You mean — you used to be...human?"

"For twenty years I sold life insurance under the name Lewis Phelps. Have no fear, Blake. We are not harvesting your cerebrum in vain. I shall employ my Altruoid allotment to bestow great boons on Greenbriar."

"You might fancy yourself a moral giant," I told the bull man, "but as far as I'm concerned, you're a terrorist and a brain thief, and I intend to bring this matter to the police."

"You will find that strategy difficult to implement." Maxwell left his piano and, walking upright on his hooves, approached my library cart. "Pollifex Farm is enclosed by a barbed-wire fence twelve feet high. I suggest you try making the best of your situation."

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The thought of punching Maxwell in the face now occurred to me, but I dared not risk uprooting my arteries and spinal cord. "If Pollifex continues pilfering my cortex, how long before I become a basket case?"

"Never. The doctor happens to be the world's greatest neurocartographer. He'll bring exquisite taste and sensitivity to each extraction. During the next three years, you'll lose only trivial knowledge, useless skills, and unpleasant memories."

"Three years?" I howled. "You bastards plan to keep me here *three years*?"

"Give or take a month. Once that interval has passed, my peers and I shall have reached the absolute apex of vertebrate ethical development."

"See, Blake, they've thought of *everything*," said Vickie. "These people are *visionaries*."

"These people are Nazis," I said.

"Really, sir, name calling is unnecessary," said Maxwell with a snort. "There's no reason we can't all be friends." He rested an affirming hand on my shoulder. "We've given you a great deal of information to absorb. I suggest you spend tomorrow afternoon in quiet contemplation. Come evening, we'll all be joining the doctor for dinner. It's a meal you're certain to remember."

MY NEW BRIDE and I passed the night in our depressing little cottage beside the windmill. Much to my relief, I discovered that my sexual functioning had survived the bilateral hemispherectomy. We had to exercise caution, of course, lest we snap the vital link between medulla and cord, with the result that the whole encounter quickly devolved into a kind of slow-motion ballet. Vickie said it was like mating with a china figurine, the first negative remark I'd heard her make concerning my predicament.

At ten o'clock the next morning, one of Karl's human-headed sheep entered the bedroom, walking upright and carrying a wicker tray on which rested two covered dishes. When I asked the sheep how long she'd been living at Pollifex Farm, her expression became as vacant as a cake of soap. I concluded that the power of articulation was reserved only to those mutants on an Altruoid regimen.

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The sheep bowed graciously and left, and we set about devouring our scrambled eggs, hot coffee, and buttered toast. Upon consuming her final mouthful, Vickie announced that she would spend the day reading two scientific treatises she'd received from Maxwell, both by Dr. Pollifex: *On the Mutability of Species* and *The Descent of Morals*. I told her I had a different agenda. If there was a way out of this bucolic asylum, I was by-God going to find it.

Before I could take leave of my wife, Karl himself appeared, clutching a black leather satchel to his chest as a mother might hold a baby. He told me he deeply regretted Wednesday's assault — I must admit, I detected no guile in his apology — then explained that he'd come to collect the day's specimen. From the satchel he removed a glass-and-steel syringe, using it to suck up a small quantity of anterior cortex and transfer it to a test tube. When I told Karl that I felt nothing during the procedure, he reminded me that the human brain is an insensate organ, nerveless as a stone.

I commenced my explorations. Pollifex's domain was vaster than I'd imagined, though most of its fields and pastures were deserted. True to the bull man's claim, a fence hemmed the entire farm, the barbed-wire strands woven into a kind of demonic tennis net and strung between steel posts rising from a concrete foundation. In the northeast corner lay a barn as large as Maxwell's concert hall, and it was here, clearly, that Andre Pollifex perpetrated his various crimes against nature. The doors were barred, the windows occluded, but by staring through the cracks in the walls I managed to catch glimpses of hospital gurneys, surgical lights, and three enormous glass beakers in which sallow, teratoid fetuses drifted like pickles in brine.

About twenty paces from Pollifex's laboratory, a crumbling tool shed sat atop a hill of naked dirt. I gave the door a hard shove — not too hard, given my neurological vulnerability — and it pivoted open on protesting hinges. A shaft of afternoon sunlight struck the interior, revealing an assortment of rakes, shovels, and pitchforks, plus a dozen bags of fertilizer — but, alas, no wire cutters.

My perambulations proved exhausting, both mentally and physically, and I returned to the cottage for a much-needed nap. That afternoon, my brain tormented me with the notorious "student's dream." I'd enrolled in an advanced biology course at my old alma mater, Rutgers, but

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I hadn't attended a single class or handed in even one assignment. And now I was expected to take the final exam.

Vickie, my brain, and I were the last to arrive at Andre Pollifex's dinner party, which occurred in an airy glass-roofed conservatory attached to the back of the farmhouse. The room smelled only slightly better than the piano barn. At the head of the table presided our host, a disarmingly ordinary-looking man, weak of jaw, slight of build, distinguished primarily by his small black mustache and complementary goatee. His face was pale and flaccid, as if he'd been raised in a cave. The instant he opened his mouth to greet us, though, I apprehended something of his glamour, for he had the most majestic voice I've ever heard outside of New York's Metropolitan Opera House.

"Welcome, Mr. and Mrs. Meeshaw," he said. "May I call you Blake and Vickie?"

"Of course," said Vickie.

"May I call you Joseph Mengele?" I said.

Pollifex's white countenance contracted into a scowl. "I can appreciate your distress, Blake. Your sacrifice has been great. I believe I speak for everyone here when I say that our gratitude knows no bounds."

Karl directed us into adjacent seats, then resumed his place next to Pollifex, directly across from the bull man. I found myself facing a pig woman whose large ears flopped about like college pennants and whose snout suggested an oversized button. Vickie sat opposite a goat man with a tapering white beard dangling from his chin and two corrugated horns sprouting from his brow.

"I'm Serge Milkovich," said the goat man, shaking first Vickie's hand, then mine. "In my former life I was Bud Frye, plumbing contractor."

"Call me Juliana Sowers," said the pig woman, enacting the same ritual. "At one time I was Doris Owens of Owens Real Estate, but then I found a higher calling. I cannot begin to thank you for the contribution you're making to science, philosophy, and local politics."

"Local politics?" I said.

"We three beneficiaries of QZ-11-4 form the core of the new Common Sense Party," said Juliana. "We intend to transform Greenbriar into the most livable community in America."

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"I'm running for Borough Council," said Serge. "Should my campaign prove successful, I shall fight to keep our town free of Consumerland discount stores. Their advent is inevitably disastrous for local merchants."

Juliana crammed a handful of hors d'oeuvres into her mouth. "I seek a position on the School Board. My stances won't prove automatically popular — better pay for elementary teachers, sex education starting in grade four — but I'm prepared to support them with passion and statistics."

Vickie grabbed my hand and said, "See what I mean, Blake? They may be mutants, but they have terrific ideas."

"As for me, I've got my eye on the Planning Commission," said Maxwell, releasing a loud and disconcerting burp. "Did you know there's a scheme afoot to run the Route 80 Extension along our northern boundary, just so it'll be easier for people to get to Penn State football games? Once construction begins, the environmental desecration will be profound."

As Maxwell expounded upon his anti-extension arguments, a half-dozen sheep arrived with our food. In deference to Maxwell and Juliana, the cuisine was vegetarian: tofu, lentils, capellini with meatless marinara sauce. It was all quite tasty, but the highlight of the meal was surely the venerable and exquisite vintages from Pollifex's cellar. After my first few swallows of Brunello di Montalcino, I worried that Pollifex's scalpel had denied me the pleasures of intoxication, but eventually the expected sensation arrived. (I attributed the hiatus to the extra distance my blood had to travel along my extended arteries.) By the time the sheep were serving dessert, I was quite tipsy, though my bursts of euphoria alternated uncontrollably with spasms of anxiety.

"Know what I think?" I said, locking on Pollifex as I struggled to prevent my brain from slurring my words. "I think you're trying to turn me into a zombie."

The doctor proffered a heartening smile. "Your discomfort is understandable, Blake, but I can assure you all my interventions have been innocuous thus far — and will be in the future. Tell me, what two classroom pets did your second-grade teacher, Mrs. Hines, keep beside her desk, and what were their names?"

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"I have no idea."

"Of course you don't. That useless memory vanished with the first extraction. A hamster and a chameleon. Florence and Charlie. Now tell me about the time you threw up on your date for the senior prom."

"That never happened."

"Yes it did, but I have spared you any recollection of the event. Nor will you ever again be haunted by the memory of forgetting your lines during the Cransford Community Theater production of *A Moon for the Misbegotten*. Now please recite Joyce Kilmer's 'Trees.'"

"All right, all right, you've made your point," I said. "But you still have no right to mess with my head." I swallowed more wine. "As for this ridiculous Common Sense Party — okay, sure, these candidates might get *my* vote — I'm for better schools and free enterprise and all that — but the average Greenbriar citizen...." In lieu of stating the obvious, I finished my wine.

"What *about* the average Greenbriar citizen?" said Juliana huffily.

"The average Greenbriar citizen will find us morphologically unacceptable?" said Serge haughtily.

"Well...yes," I replied.

"Unpleasantly odiferous?" said Maxwell snippily.

"That too."

"Homely?" said Juliana defensively.

"I wouldn't be surprised."

The sheep served dessert — raspberry and lemon sorbet — and the seven of us ate in silence, painfully aware that mutual understanding between myself and the Common Sense Party would be a long time coming.

During the final two weeks of June, Karl siphoned fourteen additional specimens from my superego, one extraction per day. On the Fourth of July, the shepherd unwound my bandages. Although I disbelieved his assertion to be a trained nurse, I decided to humor him. When he pronounced that my head was healing satisfactorily, I praised his expertise, then listened intently as he told me how to maintain the incision, an ugly ring of scabs and sutures circumscribing my cranium like a crown of thorns.

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As the hot, humid, enervating month elapsed, the Common Sense candidates finished devising their strategies, and the campaign began in earnest. The piano barn soon overflowed with shipping crates full of leaflets, brochures, metal buttons, T-shirts, bumper stickers, and pork-pie hats. With each passing day, my skepticism intensified. A goat running for Borough Council? A pig on the School Board? A bull guiding the Planning Commission? Pollifex's menagerie didn't stand a chance.

My doubts received particularly vivid corroboration on July 20th, when the doctor staged a combination cocktail party and fund-raiser at the farmhouse. From among the small but ardent population of political progressives inhabiting Greenbriar, Pollifex had identified thirty of the wealthiest. Two dozen accepted his invitation. Although these potential contributors were clearly appalled by my bifurcation, they seemed to accept Pollifex's explanation. (I suffered from a rare neurological disorder amenable only to the most radical surgery.) But then the candidates themselves sauntered into the living room, and Pollifex's guests immediately lost their powers of concentration.

It wasn't so much that Maxwell, Juliana, and Serge looked like an incompetent demiurge's roughest drafts. The real problem was that they'd retained so many traits of the creatures to which they'd been grafted. Throughout the entire event, Juliana stuffed her face with canapés and petits fours. Whenever Serge engaged a potential donor in conversation, he crudely emphasized his points by ramming his horns into the listener's chest. Maxwell, meanwhile, kept defecating on the living-room carpet, a behavior not redeemed by the mildly pleasant fragrance that a vegetarian diet imparts to bovine manure. By the time the mutants were ready to deliver their formal speeches, the pledges stood at a mere fifty dollars, and every guest had manufactured an excuse to leave.

"Your idea is never going to work," I told Pollifex after the candidates had returned to their respective barns. We were sitting in the doctor's kitchen, consuming mugs of French roast coffee. The door stood open. A thousand crickets sang in the meadow.

"This is a setback, not a catastrophe," said Pollifex, brushing crumbs from his white dinner jacket. "Maxwell is a major Confucius scholar, with strong Kantian credentials as well. He can surely become housebroken. Juliana is probably the finest utilitarian philosopher since John Stuart

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Mill. For such a mind, table manners will prove a snap. If you ask Serge about the Sermon on the Mount, he'll recite the King James translation without a fluff. Once I explain how uncouth he's being, he'll learn to control his butting urge."

"Nobody wants to vote for a candidate with horns."

"It will take a while — quite a while — before Greenbriar's citizens appreciate this slate, but eventually they'll hop on the bandwagon." Pollifex poured himself a second cup of French roast. "Do you doubt that my mutants are ethical geniuses? Can you imagine, for example, how they responded to the Prisoner's Dilemma?

For three years running, I had used the Prisoner's Dilemma in my Introduction to Philosophy class. It's a situation-ethics classic, first devised in 1951 by Merrill Flood of the RAND Corporation. Imagine that you and a stranger have been arrested as accomplices in manslaughter. You are both innocent. The state's case is weak. Even though you don't know each other, you and the stranger form a pact. You will both stonewall it, maintaining your innocence no matter what deals the prosecutor may offer.

Each of you is questioned privately. Upon entering the interrogation room, the prosecutor lays out four possibilities. If you and your presumed accomplice hang tough, confessing to nothing, you will each get a short sentence, a mere seven months in prison. If you admit your guilt and implicate your fellow prisoner, you will go scot free — and your presumed accomplice will serve a life sentence. If you hang tough and your fellow prisoner confesses-and-implicates, *he* will go scot free — and *you* will serve a life sentence. Finally, if you and your fellow prisoner both confess-and-implicate, you will each get a medium sentence, four years behind bars.

It doesn't take my students long to realize that the most logical course is to break faith with the stranger, thus guaranteeing that you won't spend your life in prison if he also defects. The uplifting-but-uncertain possibility of a short sentence must lose out to the immoral-but-immutable fact of a medium sentence. Cooperation be damned.

"Your mutants probably insist that they would keep faith regardless of the consequences," I said. "They would rather die than violate a trust."

"Their answer is subtler than that," said Pollifex. "They would tell the prosecutor, 'You imagine that my fellow prisoner and I have made a

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pact, and in that you are correct. You further imagine that you can manipulate us into breaking faith with one another. But given your obsession with betrayal, I must conclude that you are yourself a liar, and that you will ultimately seek to convert our unwilling confessions into life sentences. I refuse to play this game. Let's go to court instead.'"

"An impressive answer," I said. "But the fact remains...." Reaching for the coffee pot, I let my voice drift away. "Suppose I poured some French roast directly into my jar? Would I be jolted awake?"

"Don't try it," said Pollifex.

"I won't."

The mutant maker scowled strenuously. "You think I'm some sort of mad scientist."

"Restore my brain," I told him. "Leave the farm, get a job at Pfizer, wash your hands of politics."

"I'm *a* sane scientist, Blake. I'm *the* last sane scientist in the world."

I looked directly in his eyes. The face that returned my gaze was neither entirely mad nor entirely sane. It was the face of a man who wasn't sleeping well, and it made me want to run away.

THE FOLLOWING morning, my routine wanderings along the farm's perimeter brought me to a broad, swiftly flowing creek about twelve feet wide and three deep. Although the barbed-wire net extended beneath the water, clear to the bottom, I suddenly realized how a man might circumvent it. By redirecting the water's flow via a series of dikes, I could desiccate a large section of the creek bed and subsequently dig my way out of this hellish place. I would need only one of the shovels I'd spotted in the tool shed — a shovel, and a great deal of luck.

Thus it was that I embarked on a secret construction project. Every day at about eleven A.M., right after Karl took the specimen from my superego, I slunk off to the creek and spent a half-hour adding rocks, logs, and mud to the burgeoning levees, returning to the cottage in time for lunch. Although the creek proved far less pliable than I'd hoped, I eventually became its master. Within two weeks, I figured, possibly three, a large patch of sand and pebbles would lie exposed to the hot summer sun, waiting to receive my shovel.

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Naturally I was tempted to tell Vickie of my scheme. Given my handicap, I could certainly have used her assistance in building the levees. But in the end I concluded that, rather than endorsing my bid for freedom, she would regard it as a betrayal of the Common Sense Party and its virtuous agenda.

I knew I'd made the right decision when Vickie entered our cottage late one night in the form of a gigantic mutant hen. Her body had become a bulbous mass of feathers, her legs had transmuted into fleshy stilts, and her face now sported a beak the size of a funnel. Obviously she was running for elective office, but I couldn't imagine which one. She lost no time informing me. Her ambition, she explained, was to become Greenbriar's next mayor.

"I've even got an issue," she said.

"I don't want to hear about it," I replied, looking her up and down. Although she still apparently retained her large and excellent breasts beneath her bikini top, their present context reduced their erotic content considerably.

"Do you know what Greenbriar needs?" she proclaimed. "Traffic diverters at certain key intersections! Our neighborhoods are being suffocated by the automobile!"

"You shouldn't have done this, Vickie," I told her.

"My name is Eva Pullo," she clucked.

"These people have brainwashed you!"

"The Common Sense Party is the hope of the future!"

"You're talking like a fascist!" I said.

"At least I'm not a coward like you!" said the chicken.

For the next half-hour we hurled insults at each other — our first real post-marital fight — and then I left in a huff, eager to continue my arcane labors by the creek. In a peculiar way I still loved Vickie, but I sensed that our relationship was at an end. When I made my momentous escape, I feared, she would not be coming with me.

Even as I redirected the creek, the four mutant candidates brought off an equally impressive feat — something akin to a miracle, in fact. They got the citizens of Greenbriar to listen to them, and the citizens liked what they heard.

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The first breakthrough occurred when Maxwell appeared along with three other Planning Commission candidates — Republican, Democrat, Libertarian — on Greenbriar's local-access cable channel. I watched the broadcast in the farmhouse, sitting on the couch between Vickie and Dr. Pollifex. Although the full-blooded humans on the podium initially refused to take Maxwell seriously, the more he talked about his desire to prevent the Route 80 Extension from wreaking havoc with local ecosystems, the clearer it became that this mutant had charisma. Maxwell's eloquence was breathtaking, his logic impeccable, his sincerity sublime. He committed no fecal faux pas.

"That bull was on his game," I admitted at the end of the transmission.

"The moderator was *enchanted*," enthused Vickie.

"Our boy is going to win," said Pollifex.

Two days later, Juliana kicked off her campaign for School Board. Aided by the ever-energetic Vickie, she had outfitted the back of an old yellow school bus with a Pullman car observation platform, the sort of stage from which early twentieth-century presidential candidates campaigned while riding the rails. Juliana and Vickie also transformed the bus's interior, replacing the seats with a coffee bar, a chat lounge, and racks of brochures explaining the pig woman's ambition to expand the sex education program, improve services for special-needs children, increase faculty awareness of the misery endured by gay students, and — most audacious of all — invert the salary pyramid so that first-grade teachers would earn more than high-school administrators. Day in, day out, Juliana tooled around Greenbriar in her appealing vehicle, giving out iced cappuccino, addressing crowds from the platform, speaking to citizens privately in the lounge, and somehow managing to check her impulse toward gluttony, all the while exhibiting a caliber of wisdom that eclipsed her unappetizing physiognomy. The tour was a fabulous success — such, at least, was the impression I received from watching the blurry, jerky coverage that Vickie accorded the pig woman's campaign with Pollifex's camcorder. Every time the school bus pulled away from a Juliana Sowers rally, it left behind a thousand tear-stained eyes, so moved were the citizens by her commitment to the glorious ideal of public education.

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Serge, meanwhile, participated in a series of "Meet the Candidates" nights along with four other Borough Council hopefuls. Even when mediated by Vickie's shaky videography, the inaugural gathering at Greenbriar Town Hall came across as a powerful piece of political theater. Serge fully suppressed his impulse to butt his opponents — but that was the smallest of his accomplishments. Without slinging mud, flinging innuendo, or indulging in disingenuous rhetoric, he made his fellow candidates look like moral idiots for their unwillingness to stand firm against what he called "the insatiable greed of Consumerland." Before the evening ended, the attending voters stood prepared to tar-and-feather any discount chain executive who might set foot in Greenbriar, and it was obvious they'd also embraced Serge's other ideas for making the Borough Council a friend to local business. If Serge's plans came to fruition, shoppers would eventually flock to the downtown, lured by parking-fee rebates, street performers, bicycle paths, mini-playgrounds, and low-cost supervised day care.

As for Vickie's mayoral campaign — which I soon learned to call Eva Pullo's mayoral campaign — it gained momentum the instant she shed her habit of pecking hecklers on the head. Vickie's commitment to reducing the automobile traffic in residential areas occasioned the grandest rhetorical flights I'd ever heard from her. "A neighborhood should exist for the welfare of its children, not the convenience of its motorists," she told the local chapter of the League of Women Voters. "We must not allow our unconsidered veneration of the automobile to mask our fundamental need for community and connectedness," she advised the Chamber of Commerce. By the middle of August, Vickie had added a dozen other environmentalist planks to her platform, including an ingenious proposal to outfit the town's major highways with underground passageways for raccoons, badgers, woodchucks, skunks, and possums.

You must believe me, reader, when I say that my conversion to the Common Sense Party occurred well before the *Greenbriar Daily Times* published its poll indicating that the entire slate — Maxwell Taurus, Juliana Sowers, Serge Milkovich, Eva Pullo — enjoyed the status of shoo-ins. I was not simply trying to ride with the winners. When I abandoned my plan to dig an escape channel under the fence, I was doing what I thought was right. When I resolved to spend the next three years nursing

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the Pollifex Farm candidates from my cerebral teat, I was fired by an idealism so intense that the pragmatists among you would blush to behold it.

I left the levees in place, however, just in case I had a change of heart.

THE ATTACK ON Pollifex Farm started shortly after eleven P.M. It was Halloween night, which means that the raiders probably aroused no suspicions whatsoever as, dressed in shrouds and skull masks, they drove their pickup trucks through the streets of Greenbriar and down Spring Valley Road. To this day, I'm not sure who organized and paid for the atrocity. At its core, I suspect, the mob included not only yahoos armed with torches but also conservatives gripped by fear, moderates transfixed by cynicism, liberals in the pay of the *status quo*, libertarians acting out anti-government fantasies, and a few random anarchists looking for a good time. Whatever their conflicting allegiances, the vigilantes stood united in their realization that Andre Pollifex, sane scientist, was about to unleash a reign of enlightenment on Greenbriar. They were having none of it.

I was experiencing yet another version of the student's dream — this time I'd misconnected not simply with one class but with an entire college curriculum — when shouts, gunshots, and the neighing of frightened horses awoke me. Taking hold of the library cart, I roused Vickie by ruffling her feathers, and side by side we stumbled into the parlor. By the time we'd made our way outside, the windmill, tractor shed, corn crib, and centaur stables were all on fire. Although I could not move quickly without risking permanent paralysis, Vickie immediately sprang into action. Transcending her spheroid body, she charged into the burning stables and set the mutant horses free, and she proved equally unflappable when the vigilantes hurled their torches into Maxwell's residence. With little thought for her personal safety, she ran into the flaming piano barn, located the panicked bull man and the equally discombobulated pig woman — in recent months they'd entered into a relationship whose details needn't concern us here — and led them outside right before the roof collapsed in a great red wave of cascading sparks and flying embers.

And still the arsonists continued their assault, blockading the main

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gate with bales of burning hay, setting fire to the chicken coop, and turning Pollifex's laboratory into a raging inferno. Catching an occasional glimpse of our spectral enemies, their white sheets flashing in the light of the flames, I saw that they would not become hoist by their own petards, for they had equipped themselves with asbestos suits, scuba regulators, and compressed air tanks. As for the inhabitants of Pollifex Farm, it was certain that if we didn't move quickly, we would suffer either incineration, suffocation, or their concurrence in the form of fatally seared lungs.

Although I had never felt so divided, neither the fear spasms in my chest nor the jumbled thoughts in my jar prevented me from realizing what the mutants must do next. I told them to steal shovels from the tool shed, make for the creek, and follow it to the fence. Thanks to my levees, I explained, the bed now lay in the open air. Within twenty minutes or so, they should be able to dig below the barbed-wire net and gouge a dry channel for themselves. The rest of my plan had me bringing up the rear, looking out for Karl, Serge, and Dr. Pollifex so that I might direct them to the secret exit. Vickie kissed my lips, Juliana caressed my cheek, Maxwell embraced my brain, and then all three candidates rushed off into the choking darkness.

Before that terrible night was out, I indeed found the other Party members. Karl lay dead in a mound of straw beside the sheep barn, his forehead blasted away by buckshot. Serge sat on the rear porch of the farmhouse, his left horn broken off and thrust fatally into his chest. Finally I came upon Pollifex. The vigilantes had roped the doctor to a maple tree, subjected him to target practice, and left him for dead. He was as perforated as Saint Sebastian. A mattock, a pitchfork, and two scythes projected from his body like quills from a porcupine.

"Andre, it's me, Blake," I said, approaching.

"Blake?" he muttered. "Blake? Oh, Blake, they killed Serge. They killed Karl."

"I know. Vickie got away, and Maxwell too, and Juliana."

"I was a sane scientist," said Pollifex.

"Of course," I said.

"There are some things that expediency was not meant to tamper with."

"I agree."

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"Pullo for Mayor!" he shouted.

"Taurus for Planning Commission!" I replied.

"Milkovich for Borough Council!" he shouted. "Sowers for School Board!" he screamed, and then he died.

There's not much more to tell. Although Vickie, Juliana, Maxwell, and I all escaped the burning farm that night, the formula for the miraculous serum died with Dr. Pollifex. Deprived of their weekly Altruoid injections, the mutants soon lost their talent for practical idealism, and their political careers sputtered out. Greenbriar now boasts a mammoth new Consumerland. The Route 80 extension is almost finished. High school principals still draw twice the pay of first-grade teachers. Life goes on.

The last time I saw Juliana, she was the opening act at Caesar's Palace in Atlantic City. A few songs, some impersonations, a standup comedy routine — mostly vegetarian humor and animal-rights jokes leavened by a sardonic feminism. The crowd ate it up, and Juliana seemed to be enjoying herself. But, oh, what a formidable School Board member she would've made!

When the Route 80 disaster occurred, Maxwell was devastated — not so much by the extension itself as by his inability to critique it eloquently. These days he plays piano at Emilio's, a seedy bar in Newark. He is by no means the weirdest presence in the place, and he enjoys listening to the customers' troubles. But he is a broken mutant.

Vickie and I did our best to make it work, but in the end we decided that mixed marriages entail insurmountable hurdles, and we split up. Eventually she got a job hosting a preschool children's television show on the Disney Channel, *Arabella's Barnyard Band*. Occasionally she manages to insert a satiric observation about automobiles into her patter.

As for me, after hearing the tenth neurosurgeon declare that I am beyond reassembly, I decided to join the world's eternal vagabonds. I am brother to the Wandering Jew, the Flying Dutchman, and Marley's Ghost. I shuffle around North America, dragging my library cart behind me, exhibiting my fractured self to anyone who's willing to pay. In the past decade, my employers have included three carnivals, four roadside peep shows, two direct-to-video horror movie producers, and an artsy off-Broadway troupe bent on reviving *Le Grand Guignol*.

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And always I remain on the lookout for another Andre Pollifex, another scientist who can manufacture QZ-11-4 serum and use it to turn beasts into politicians. I shall not settle for any sort of Pollifex, of course. The actual Pollifex, for example, would not meet my standards. The man bifurcated me without my permission, and I cannot forgive him for that.

The scientist I seek would unflinchingly martyr himself to the Prisoner's Dilemma. As they hauled him away to whatever dungeon is reserved for such saints, he would turn to the crowd and say, "The personal cost was great, but at least I have delivered a fellow human from an unjust imprisonment. And who knows? Perhaps his anguish over breaking faith with me will eventually transform him into a more generous friend, a better parent, or a public benefactor."

Alas, my heart is not in the quest. Only part of me — a small part, I must confess — wants to keep on making useful neurological donations. So even if there is a perfect Pollifex out there somewhere, he will probably never get to fashion a fresh batch of Altruoid. Not unless I father a child — and not unless the child receives the gene — and not unless the gene finds expression — and not unless this descendent of mine donates his superego to science. But as the bull man told me many years ago, QZ-11-4 only rarely gets actualized in the humans who carry it.

I believe I see a way around the problem. The roadside emporium in which I currently display myself also features a llama named Loretta. She can count to ten and solve simple arithmetic problems. I am enchanted by Loretta's liquid eyes, sensuous lips, and splendid form — and I think she has taken a similar interest in me. It's a relationship, I feel, that could lead almost anywhere.

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PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

Adventures in Mishmosh Land

by A. Patchwork Girl, Customizer

"The Frommer's guide to France may be made up of chapters and maps, but most readers know it as an indivisible and coherent whole: a book.

"This fall, that book and a few hundred others will take a new form on the Internet. They will be sold in component parts — chapters, maps and even paragraphs — that can be mixed and matched. Readers will be invited to create customized books by picking pieces of content *à la carte* from an array of already published guides...."

— "Books by the Chapter or Verse Arrive on the Internet This Fall," by Lisa Guernsey, *The New York Times*, July 18, 2000.

THE LANDING party from the *Enterprise*, consisting of Captain Kirk, Scotty, Bones, and Spock, beamed down onto the surface of the strange new unexplored world. As soon as they had fully materialized, Kirk flipped open his communicator and hailed his ship in orbit above.

"Lieutenant Uhura, notify Starfleet Command that we've arrived — "

" — on Arrakis, you know, Paul, water is at a premium. That's why we must render down our corpses for their liquid content. To do otherwise would be to risk — "

— the foul wrath of Sauron. "You have failed me for the last time! How did you let those hobbits escape? By sheer ineptitude!"

The Orc leader snarled. "They had help! Elvish intervention from that accursed — "

— Lazarus Long, who smiled now with his trademark centuries-old boyish charm. "Shucks, ma'am, it's just that I was born with — "

A ten-inch-long serpent crawled out of the Healer's pouch. But before the Dreamsnake could escape —

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— the hologram of Hari Seldon materialized, exactly at the appointed hour, and began to speak. "Members of the Foundation, psychohistory faces its greatest challenge with the appearance of — "

— Rama, an artificial world unto itself, appearing out of nowhere on its chartless course through our solar system and beyond, heading for —

— Ringworld, whose orbit had been disturbed so that it would soon brush up against —

— Confluence, where an endless river debouched onto —

— Riverworld, where Mark Twain looked up into the sky and spotted —

— Orbitsville, which had recently seen the arrival of —

— the Black Star! "Come on, lads! We can still save the day! I've charged up the accumulators on — "

— the Skylark of Space! Shields coruscating, the mighty craft plunged straight toward —

— the Emerald City of Oz. Here, Dorothy would at last find the answers to her many questions:

Who can replace a man?

Can you feel anything when I do this?

Who made Stevie Crye?

Do androids dream of —

— the body electric! Grandma, O dear and wondrous electric dream! When storm lightnings rove the sky of —

— Jupiter, where the re-engineered human and his canine companion blissfully and telepathically communicated, firm in their agreement that they would never return to —

— Nevèrÿon, where Gorgik fondled his slave collar, vowing —

— that the criminal who had shot down his mother and father in cold blood would someday know the wrath of the Caped —

— High Crusade! Aboard the supernatural iron vessel, the knights hunkered in a frightened mass, while their horses —

— spoke to Gulliver —

— Jones of Mars —

— the dying planet whose empty canals beckoned John Carter and his bride —

— the Female Man —

— the Demolished Man —

— who folded himself, on an endless trip —

— across the universe —

— across a sea of stars —

— beyond the blue event horizon —

— beyond the fields we know —

— to the end of eternity —

— Destination: void.

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A winner of the World Fantasy Award for lifetime achievement, Gene Wolfe is the author of such books as The Devil in a Forest, Peace, Soldier of the Mist, *and* The Shadow of the Torturer *and the other novels comprising the* Book of the New Sun. *You can read more about his most recent book in Rob Killheffer's book column this month. Mr. Wolfe's latest story for us is a subtle tale of alien life.*

In Glory Like Their Star

By Gene Wolfe

WE DINED LAST NIGHT before seven skun of natives who had built a stone table for us. They heaped it with wood, set the wood ablaze, and cooked our food by throwing it into the fire. We pulled out the parts we wanted and in the end ate nearly all of it, though it was scorched here and raw there. (The hard, white parts are rich in calcium.) How is it that we can eat their food when it is not vegetable in origin? I must ask the others.

They revere our ship and us. We talked with them about it. They speak for a very long time when they have begun (and do not like to be interrupted), saying the same things over and over in the same words, or at times with changes in the wording. They want us to be kind to them, to destroy their enemies, and to make their crops grow. It seems senseless to me, and I do not believe the others understand better than I. Why should we be kind to them when they are unkind to each other? If we are to understand them — and they, us — we must act as they. So much is manifest. Are not their enemies in no regard different from themselves? If we were to destroy these natives instead, the same result would ensue

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with less difficulty and less chance of error. I may propose it. Of what benefit are the crops to them? This place swarms with food untended. The desert people, who grow none, eat as well as they and with less trouble. These crops they ask us to encourage only encourage their own gluttony. If there is another result, it can be but small.

When they had sung and talked and sung and talked until they and we were tired, we spoke together for a time almost sensibly. We told them something of our home, and though we told them very little it was more than they could understand. Our long voyage through space impressed them. I doubt they grasped its length, for their concepts of the five they call "time" are muddled, and so erroneous that they cannot be termed primitive with any precision. They will be primitive, perhaps, when sunlight reaches them on this place.

Someone told them that I was in the scout first sent from our ship. That impressed them too, although they can have had little notion what my mission was or why I chose to perform it. They asked many questions, of which a few were sensible. They could not understand (I cite an example where I might cite many) why I went alone. Even the youngest soon grasps that where there are two they must often look at each other and not at the place they have been sent to see, and that three will be worse than two, and four worse than three. That those in a crowd see nothing, save its other members. Some may be acute observers. Often some are. But they will observe (acutely) those before and behind, and to one side and the other, and the crowd as a whole will always see less than any member has.

I told them how I had landed in the desert lands. I was unable to control my loquacity once I had begun and tried to tell them how those lands had appeared to me. The wind that was never still, and the sand that whispered and whispered under my foot, speaking of great trees and beasts, and fair meadows that had vanished only a moment before we came. The flaming lights that filled the night sky, the cold of night and the heat of day. Cities and forests and mountain ranges and vast lakes of tossing water that seemed not so far away that a shout might not reach them, but vanished too as I approached them on my machine. No matter how swiftly I rode. They nodded, as I had expected, and looked at one another; but they did not understand. Less even than those who share our ship did they understand me.

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Perhaps I said also how lonely a place the desert is. Perhaps it was my saying it that prompted them to ask why no one had come with me. That would be logical and so must be true — or as the pedants would have it, must be accepted as true until the truth be found.

Was it for truth's sake that I rode across the desert? Was it for truth's sake that I pursued my melting cities and the lakes that evaporated as I approached them? Inarguably. Across that desert — I will never forget it, and because I will not, I will never forget this place, which the large subspecies (that is, those without tails) call Earth — I rode for truth, rising before their star and riding onward, always on so long as I could be certain my way was clear, after it had fallen beneath the horizon.

In that desert the horizon is larger than a place of this size can produce. I think it clear that this place is not a true sphere (though most are) but has a flat spot: its desert. I must mention this to the others. Some may agree.

If it is so, the level desert must appear to one near its center to rise all around, so that he moves only with augmented effort in every direction, since each step carries him farther from the center. Walking upon level ground, he nonetheless ascends its gravity pit. A flat pit, this, which tires and bewilders. That is exactly how it seemed to me, and if my theory does not embrace the physical facts (though I am sure it does) it embraces the subjective ones. This in itself may be a new discovery.

Every theory is true in some discipline.

The beauty of this is that it carries its own confirmation. It ravishes me.

When I had begun to tell of my time alone, some of the others tried to explain what knowledge is, and how it is to be valued. The natives could not understand, saying again and again in many different ways that knowledge is a thing one uses. We sought to explain by the Great Disciplines that such things have nothing to do with its value. We spoke much of our ship, because they themselves had spoken of it again and again, saying (with many voices) that our great knowledge had permitted us to build it. That is so, but who would labor to gain knowledge for such a purpose? It is the interior change that suffices, the transformation that rewards. I know that you know this, but they could not understand.

At last I spoke again of the desert. Not because I felt I could add to their understanding, but because I myself had understood that they would have

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to gain much more knowledge than they possessed, and undergo many interior changes by its power, before they themselves could understand. The little ones with tails would never. Of that I am certain. But the larger subspecies may, in time.

It is not easy for me to speak of the desert. Still less easy is it for me to scribe it as I do. There is so much that might be said; and yet no one who reads this will have understanding of the desert. Not even those who share this ship with me have it. One must go.

I say again: one must go. I went.

Perhaps there can be too much understanding. I have so much now, and that is why I will never forget this place. My companions understand nothing of that. The whisper of the sands, and the night silence when the sands no longer spoke. Although I had homeair, I found it difficult to breathe when the sands fell silent.

Yet the homeair never failed me. If it had I would be dead. I would be dead and not he.

So much failed me. My companions first of all. The people of this place were correct tonight. One must not see too much, and never is that more true than it is when sight shows only how little there is to be seen. The emptiness. The sand, mountains of sand that move like water animals. The black rocks, uncovered by the wind. Covered by the wind. Uncovered by the wind once again. The wind itself, a thing that spins and strides.

My navigator failed. I do not mean that it would no longer indicate a direction for the scout that had carried me down. It did. I rode and rode. I would sleep on the couch, I told myself. I would eat from the little cold-closet under the work flat. At last, when I was so weary that I feared I would strike a rock and fall, I stopped and ate the last of the food I had carried, and slept (as I had before) upon the sand. When I woke the navigator indicated a direction for the scout indeed, but it was a new direction. My machine no longer pointed as the navigator pointed. They had come for me, I thought. They had come for me, and for some reason — no doubt for the best of reasons — they had moved the scout to a new location. To a better landing place, and a place nearer me than the place where I had at first landed, for the distance was very short now. I rode as the navigator directed, and the distance increased. When I rode as I had the

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previous day, it increased also. I endeavored to find a direction in which it would decrease, and the direction indicated by my navigator changed again.

Of the next days, I will not speak. On the third, I found a person of this place. My reflector deceived him, and he made the beast he rode halt for me and lie upon the sand. He gave me water; and I told him of my plight, the useless navigator, my machine broken when it collided with a stone. He told me where he was going. I begged to accompany him, for he had water.

That night we camped at a spring, a tiny place but very beautiful, where plants grew green. Dried fruits were his food, with another food like small stones that grew soft when boiled. I could eat none of it, but was glad to see him eat of it, for I knew I would perish if he died. He told stories of desert spirits that night, stories filled with knowledge though none were true. I heard him in awe, and begged that he speak on, until at last it came to me that he believed me one. I turned off my reflector then, and he abased himself.

Eight days we searched the desert for my scout and found it on the ninth. I leaped from the back of his beast and would have run to it ahead of him; but he lashed his beast to a gallop, though it was so near death, and we arrived together. I had promised him that he would live forever if we found my scout. This I told tonight to those who had burned beasts on the stone table for us, at which their eyes grew wide.

He would be taller than other men, I had promised, and stronger than the beast he rode. He had believed me, and the others, tonight, believed me too.

For a time at least.

The truth is that I believed it myself. In the scout I would be able to correct or alter my own nucleic acids. The tiny machines I inserted beneath my skin for that purpose could, I thought, be inserted beneath his also. So inserted, they would achieve the changes I directed. There in the desert it had seemed so easy.

He questioned me once more when we reached the scout. How hard he tried to ingratiate himself! How many times he touched his face to the sand! I would not cheat him. No, not I. I would never cheat him, who had saved my life in the desert. He waited for me to assert (I could see this) that he had not. But it was true, and I acknowledged it.

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The natives who fed us nodded to themselves when I recounted this. The larger sort cover their faces with hair as he did. They remind me of him, and the memory is not wholly unpleasant. How much I learned from him!

I pledged myself again and I took his body fluid. Have I already scribed this? I repeated all the promises I had made before. Better, more, and stronger, for I was starved and shrunken then and feared he would prevent me from boarding the scout. He sensed it, for he severed the head of his beast, and we cooked its flesh and ate it before I went into the scout. I had explained that he could not breathe inside, and I let him stand by me when I opened the lock. He coughed and backed away, and I — I! — achieved the goal of so many empty days.

It was a triumph, and I inspected every part of the scout glorying, and tested every instrument in every possible way, recalling my navigator. They functioned without a flaw, all of them. I was ecstatic.

And then, having grown so greatly in my own estimation, I attempted to reprogram the tiny machines. I would make my promises turn to truths.

The natives who had fed us grew restless when I spoke of this, and looked one to another. They are strange creatures, too simple for their own good; but because they are very simple, it is not easy to guess what they think or what they feel. Their thoughts will be simple thoughts, but without logic and without knowledge. Who can say where they will run? Their feelings know no truth.

It could not be done. I told them so again and again, that they might understand. For three days I labored, though by the third I knew. There was no hope.

And when this star had set (this I made as plain as I could), I restarted the engines and returned to this ship. He, waiting for the promises that could never come, died swiftly and in glory like their star.

I repeated it many times and in many ways, and it seemed to me they understood.

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Ian Watson is the author of several dozen novels and short-story collections, including God's World, Lucky's Harvest, Queenmagic, Kingmagic, The Very Slow Time Machine, *and* Oracle. *Some of his recent and upcoming projects include* The Great Escape, *a new collection of stories, a chapbook of verse tentatively called* The Lexicographer's Love Song, *and a screen credit for a movie called* A.I.

If our fan mail is any indication, there are many readers who hunger continually for tales of adventure in space. You folks should find this delicious novella most satisfying.

One of Her Paths

By Ian Watson

IN APRIL 2120 THE TEST SHIP Probe *left Earth orbit, powered by the annihilation of matter and antimatter. Since the discovery a decade previously of a tiny anti-iron asteroid and its successful harvesting employing elegant containment techniques, new superthrust engines had empowered ships to boost to the orbit of Saturn within eight weeks, a situation which the available supply of antimatter would permit for another thirty years.*

But Probe *was not testing antimatter propulsion.* Probe *was to test the Q-drive which theoretically should advance a ship to the nearer stars through probability-space, the underlying condition of reality, within several months instead of decades.* Probe*'s destination: Tau Ceti, twelve light years away.*

By June 2120 Probe *was sufficiently far out of the gravity well of the Sun for the Q-drive to switch on, and, as planned and hoped for, the test ship vanished — to reappear in the solar system a little over six months later, inward bound.*

When Probe *was recovered, the dozen rats on board were still alive,*

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hale and hearty, and of the six little monkeys, five survived in decent shape. The sixth was a victim of its food supply jamming. All the animals had been caged separately, though spaciously, supplied with exercise equipment and toys. Time-lapse cameras recorded nothing untoward during the journey through Q-space to the outskirts of Tau Ceti and back.

While Probe *had lingered on those outskirts, it had established that, of the planets of Tau Ceti already detected from the solar system, the second possessed a promising biosphere: an oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere, oceans, weather systems over the scattered landmasses. Even if only simple cells lived on that world, they had been beavering away for a long time to good purpose.*

In 2123 construction of Earth's first crewed starship, Pioneer, *began. Four years later the large ship was ready....*

Long before Doctor Mary Nolan enters *Pioneer* itself, she is thoroughly familiar with the spacious interior from virtual reality training. The Q-drive pod jutting ahead like a long battering ram tipped with a samovar, then the antimatter containers amidships that feed the engines at the stern, together form a long central spindle around which the great doughnut of living quarters rotates quickly enough to provide imitation gravity at half a gee. The doughnut houses a hundred cabins, one for each crew member.

Bed-couches are big enough that the dozen couples who are already married or partnered can bunk with one another, though who knows what may happen during the course of such an expedition? The potential for privacy is important. On top of her medical qualifications Mary's second string is psychiatry. Aside from the months necessary to progress beyond Saturn, and the six-month trip through Q-space, plus at least a year spent in the Tau Ceti system, colonization is possible (three shuttles are strapped to the spindle), so the ship is provisioned for a generous four years, not to mention the food that will be grown on board hydroponically.

After the obligatory pre-departure fortnight spent in quarantine — ten persons per isolation unit — the interior of *Pioneer* strikes Mary as particularly spacious. (After another year or so, will it still seem so roomy?) At half a gee her tread is buoyant — yet deliberate and cautious, as is the pace of other colleagues newly aboard.

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"Hi, Gisela!" It's dark-haired athletic Dr. Gisela Frick, who is qualified in microbiology and biochemistry as well as medicine and physiotherapy. Mary did not share quarantine with Gisela, nor with the expedition surgeon Dr. Yukio Yamamoto, nor with dentist and geologist Howard Coover. A surprise infection must not catch the prime medical team all together. Back-up personnel were in separate quarantine units as a precaution — a whole duplicate crew had trained.

"How does it feel to you, Gisela?"

"To be really aboard at last? Great! Ah, do you mean the motion...? It's okay." Gisela swings her head skittishly. "Oops."

The floor consists of flat sections each a couple of meters long, gently tilting with respect to one another. Curved flooring would have presented an engineering problem as regards the furnishing of cabins and the mounting of lab equipment and in many other respects, but the sense of down-orientation shifts subtly as a person walks. What's more, there are the effects of Coriolis force. Hurrying, or abrupt changes of direction, could disorient and nauseate.

"The anti-nausea pills seem to be effective," says Gisela. Of course without the centripetal semblance of gravity the rate of bone-loss would be unacceptable. "I wonder whether there could be long-term problems with tendonitis? Might we end up like birds gripping imaginary branches?"

This is not something that the virtual reality tours were able to simulate. At the moment the difference from true semi-gravity is trivial. Can it lead to physical impairment in the long run? Not that anyone will try *running* around the main corridors, but only jogging on stationary treadmills.

Greeting colleagues after a fortnight's separation from them, and nodding to fellow quarantinees, Mary and Gisela head for their clinic, not to inventory it, but more to check that it corresponds exactly with virtuality.

Which it does. As do the two gyms and the science labs and the restaurant (for the sociable) and the recreation hall and the hydroponics-cum-botany garden.... Yes, the ship is surely big enough for a hundred people to share and work together harmoniously for ages. Failing harmony and happiness, there is always recourse to one's private cabin with

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computer access to a treasury of literature, music, games, and virtual experiences from skiing to scuba-diving, all the way through the alphabet of possibilities and back again.

People, people — under the command of Commander Sherwin Peterson. Mary knows those with whom she was in quarantine quite intimately by now, many others rather well to varying degrees, and none of the others are exactly strangers; besides which, she can screen all available data about them. No excuse, after the first few days of waiting in Earth orbit, for not matching names to faces instantly.

The official language of *Pioneer* is English, but she hears occasional German and French and Japanese too. The four co-operating powers behind the expedition are America, the Euro-Union, Australia, and Japan. If a foothold can be established on Tau Ceti 2, the Chinese plan their own independent ship. No one can argue with that.

Here's John Dolby, the climatologist, John James Pine, geologist and one of the three shuttle pilots, Eric Festa, nutrition, botany, and hydroponics, Denise Dubois, astrophysics, Carmen Santos, engineering, Chikahiro Suzuki, computer systems, navigator Nellie van Torn....

TWO MONTHS LATER, *Pioneer* has passed the realm of Saturn (although its be-ringed monarch is far away) and no failures have occurred, neither of machine nor man, nor woman, aside from various minor ailments, swiftly diagnosed and cured. Mary and her two medical colleagues monitor everyone's health, making sure that sodium and iron levels do not rise. In liaison with Eric Festa they supply mineral supplements where required. An Australian pair of partners, Sandy Tate and Jeff Lee, oceanography and life science respectively, are pregnant — or rather, Sandy herself is. She must have conceived before entering quarantine, either accidentally or irresponsibly. Their child will be born toward the end of the six-month transit through Q-space, a first for the human race. Mary will keep a careful eye on Sandy. By now almost everyone is on first name terms. Pilot Pine is Jay-Jay; Dr. Suzuki is Chika. The ship is a family. How appropriate that a family should have a baby. A few other pairings are occurring, Jay-Jay and Denise, for instance. Mary is feeling a growing

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fondness and shoots of desire for Eric Festa, who reciprocates her feelings. Eric, from Dortmund, is a nourishing person to know. The two often sit in the botany section and talk amidst the orchids — for beauty — and tomatoes and carrots and soy beans for a nutritious diet.

On the evening, ship-time, preceding Q-day there's a feast in the restaurant from the ample store of varied vacuum-packed reduced sodium and iron gourmet meals.

"Compliments to the chef!" someone calls out.

"Chef's back on Earth!" dietitian Eric declares, prompting laughter and applause. Spirits are high.

Afterward, Com Sherwin reminds everyone of procedures. When the time comes to switch on the Q-drive, all personnel other than those on the bridge must be in their cabins tethered to their bed-couches. *Probe* encountered no visible problems when entering Q-space. Nevertheless, err on the safe side. Transient side effects that rats and monkeys could not report might affect human beings. Psychological or perceptual glitches, akin to the mild imbalance caused by Coriolis force.

Com Sherwin has an Air Force background, back in his younger days where backgrounds should be, his route from daring test pilot to astronaut training. He piloted the first hazardous antimatter-asteroid reconnaissance. Later, famously, he had risked his life taking *The Dart* on a flythrough the clouds of Jupiter, en route ramming a gas-whale and carrying it back into space with him spitted on *The Dart*, indeed draped around *The Dart*, its collapsed quick-frozen carcass almost enfolding his ship, a gift to science although a cause of some controversy. Of the numerous probes that had dropped into Jupiter only two had ever spotted gas-whales.

Interviewed on *Systemwide:* "Aren't the gas-whales very rare?"

Peterson: "Not in that huge volume of atmosphere. Not necessarily."

"Weren't you risking your ship and your life on a sudden impulse?"

Peterson: "I had several seconds to think. I reckoned I had a good chance."

"Apparently your pulse rate didn't even rise."

Peterson had merely grinned, engagingly.

"So what's your favorite book then, *Moby-Dick*?"

"No, actually it's Linda Bernstein's *Be Your Own Leader at Peace with Yourself.* I read a page a night."

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Peterson was solid. Capable of split-second decisiveness, yet possessing a balanced serenity, and also a folksy touch if need be.

Mary is lying abed dressed in mission multipocket-wear, green for medic, in the cabin that by now seems as familiar and homelike as her girlhood room in Michigan, listening to the calm tones of Com Sherwin from her comp speakers as Sherwin talks through the Q-sequence, only partly understood by her. She remembers doing her best to understand a lecture at Mission Control, given as part of the year-long training schedule.

"Fundamentally," a dapper, bearded Physics Professor had said, "the Q-drive functions as a quantum computer that is given the problem of translating a ship from Sunspace to Tau Ceti space. Your actual ship's computer for everyday use is a super-duper Turing-type machine. When you access your ship's computer, it may sound to you like an artificial intelligence — the software's designed to be user-friendly — but we're still twenty years away from genuine AI.

"Aw, sixty years ago people were saying the same, and AI hasn't happened yet, so I ain't making any prophecies.

"Anyway, if you set a Turing machine a really big task — for example, tell it to factorize a 500-digit number — it'll tackle solutions one after another, and that will take *ages*, even if the machine is really fast. In a quantum computer, on the other hand, all the possible answers are superposed. Superimposed simultaneously, as it were. Bingo, the wrong answers cancel each other out, and you get the right one. *Not* that this happens instantaneously — it still takes time. In the case of determining a route to Tau Ceti all routes are considered including going via Sirius or Andromeda or even by way of a quasar at the far side of the universe. Quantum theory sums over all paths between two points, as we say, and that means all possible paths."

"Does this mean," someone asked, "that we might end up in another galaxy?"

"No no, *Probe* proved that won't happen. The nonsense routes cancel out. Now a quantum device such as the drive is very specialized and needs to be kept as isolated as possible. It's entangled with the ship, but regular computing on board still has to be done by your Turing machine."

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Some wit had stuck up his hand. "I'd say that the Q-drive is the real touring machine!"

"Very droll. I was referring to computer pioneer Alan Turing, who unbelievably was hounded to suicide because he was differently sexed." Evidently a cause of anguish and anger to this lecturer.

Sum over paths, Mary muses.

Some Over-Paths. Ways of jumping from here to there. Or perhaps of burrowing.

Samovar Paths, in view of the shape of the Q-drive unit....

Summer Paths, the bright way to the stars. However, the appearance of Q-space as recorded by *Probe*'s cameras was an ocean of gray frogspawn....

"Initiating primary power uptake.... We have four green balls.... Sixty seconds to Q-insertion...."

"Thirty seconds...."

"Fifteen...."

The seconds pass. The cabin quivers and shimmers and is the same again. Same photos of family and friends and scenery sticky-tacked to the walls. Same dream-catcher mobile of feathers and knots. Same everything.

Except for the silence, silence apart from the softest hum from the speakers.

Has communication failed? In Q-space can no one hear you make announcements over electronic equipment?

"Uh, testing?" she queries the silence, and she hears her own voice clearly enough.

Mary untethers and sits up, goes to her door, slides it open. The corridor is empty; other cabin doors remain closed. Evidently she's the first to emerge. Gisela's cabin is only three doors down.

Mary knocks, then slides the door open.

Gisela's cabin is empty apart from her personal possessions.

Likewise Carmen's cabin, likewise Denise's....

All the cabins Mary tries are empty. It seems impossible that everyone can have untethered before her and gone to the bridge to look at the

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viewscreens, *impossible.* But what else could they have done? Mary must have suffered a lapse of consciousness, a gap in awareness.

To the bridge, then! Though without running or rushing.

The bridge is deserted, instruments and controls untended. Lights glow on boards, equipment purrs. On the viewscreens is the mottled gray of Q-space. No stars, just endless dimensionless frogspawn. Exactly as expected.

"Where's everyone! Will somebody answer me!"

No answer comes.

Has everyone hidden in the rec room or in the hydroponics section to play a joke on her...? She'll go to the rec room and ninety-nine voices will chorus, *Boo.* Oh really, at this momentous moment, the first entry of the first crewed ship into Q-space? And why pick on *her*?

Nevertheless, she does go to the rec room, which is deserted, then to the empty restaurant, then to the botany area where only plants are to be seen.

A type of hysterical blindness and deafness is afflicting her — people are here yet she is failing to hear and see them.

This has to be nonsense.

"Gisela! Eric! Yukio! Com Sherwin! Where are you?"

They are gone, all gone. She is alone on *Pioneer.*

The reason for this mass disappearance must be something to do with the nature of Q-space — an effect of the Q-drive as regards conscious intelligences such as human beings. So Mary reasons.

Why did *Probe*'s cameras not show monkeys and rats as missing? Ah, but the test animals were all caged separately from one another. Conceivably they did not *experience* the presence of their fellows in the other cages. But they could not report their experience, or lack of it.

Can it be that each conscious observer on board the *Pioneer* has given rise to a copy of the ship, each of which contains only one person? Right now one hundred copies of the *Pioneer* are heading through Q-space toward Tau Ceti. When all of these arrive and switch off their drives, will all the copies reintegrate and become once more one single ship with a hundred people aboard it?

Collapse of the wave function...that's the phrase, isn't it? Something

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to do with multiple probabilities becoming one concrete reality, as Mary recalls. Surely that stuff happens at the subatomic level, not to an entire ship massing thousands of tonnes.

Still, it's a lifeline to cling to: in six months time everyone will come together.

During so many months the hundred ships can hardly remain identical. Mary will consume certain supplies; absent colleagues will account for different supplies. She remembers the ripple that occurred as she entered Q-space. On emergence, will the merging ships adjust so that there are no discrepancies?

What if two people happen to be in exactly the same place? Is one of them displaced? Does that happen gently or violently?

The more she thinks about it, the more iffy the idea of reintegration becomes.

THE DESERTED SHIP is subtly menacing. Random noises might be phantom footfalls. A reflection or trick of light and shadow could be a glimpse of someone moving out of sight. Her vanished colleagues may, in their own copies of the ship, be experiencing minor psychotic episodes or hallucinations.

Suppose someone monkeys with the controls. Suppose that a copy-ship re-enters normal space prematurely, or is disabled. Reintegration might never be able to occur. *Pioneer* might fly onward forever.

She mustn't let this notion obsess her. She has hundreds of years' worth of food and drink if consumed by one person alone. She shan't starve!

If each ship is similarly stocked this seems a bit like the miracle of the loaves and fishes. How can reality multiply in such a way? Maybe Mary's is the only ship. Maybe only one conscious observer could remain in existence. By sheer chance this happened to be her.

No, no, remember all the rats. And all but one of the monkeys.

"Talking to yourself, are you, Mary?"

"Nothing wrong with that. People do talk to themselves. That's how we monitor what's going on. Helps us plan what to do next. Evolution

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didn't give us fast random-access memories — so we tell ourselves a story, the story of our self. That's how we remember things. It reinforces short-term memory."

"Adults generally talk to themselves silently, not aloud."

"Well, there's no one around to take offense. There's just me."

"Just you, eh? After a while, if you talk aloud to yourself, it's as if there are two of you — the talker, and the person you talk to. *You* can become the audience, hearing words which simply seem to emerge. In that case who is doing the talking? Listen: when we all come together again maybe we might re-enter any of a hundred different universes."

"Surely a star very like Tau Ceti has to be in the same location, otherwise how could we emerge from Q-space?"

"Ah, but maybe we would pick up no ten-year-old radio signals from the solar system, supposing we had a powerful enough receiver. In that other universe the human race may never have evolved. *Pioneer* may be the only abode of life. Tau Ceti 2 may not be habitable."

"Thanks a bundle."

"Look, why don't you talk to the *computer* more?"

"Because the computer only simulates having a mind of its own. That's why it has no name. A woman's voice, yes, and a woman's avatar-face if we want one, but no name so we won't be fooled. A psychiatrist seeking aid and counsel from a program is absurd. However sophisticated the program is, it cannot *know*. It merely listens and responds as appropriately as possible. After a while, that's maddening. Ask it how to repair a solar power plant or remind you how to fix a ruptured spleen, fine and good. It goes through its repertoire. If we did have true artificial intelligence, I dunno, maybe there would be some magic quantum link between the AIs in all the ships and we could all communicate. But we don't, and there isn't."

Of course she already asked Computer what is happening. *Pioneer* is transiting through Q-space, Mary. Do you want a full status report? No, just where is everybody else? Where is the Commander? I don't know, Mary. She may as well ask herself. She doesn't wish to confuse Computer. Just take us to where we're going and carry on with the housekeeping.

Playing her favorite arias by Puccini throughout the ship turns out to be a bad idea. The music seems to mask rustlings and whispers.

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* * *

When Mary was sixteen she thought she saw an angel. Most likely she was dazzled by sunlight while hiking through woodland. A tiny lake was a silver mirror, and bushes were covered and linked by innumerable bedewed spiders' webs. She saw a being with wings, sparkling bright. Of a sudden bird-song seemed to combine in a single rhapsody of musical counterpoint the meaning of which only just eluded her. She felt called. A few centuries earlier she might have become a nun. In the event she specialized in psychiatry after earning her medical qualifications.

Her parents were both practicing Catholics, who confessed and went to mass regularly. They always denied themselves some treat during Lent — generally, in her Dad's case, drinking with the fellows on a Saturday night. None of the fellows were Catholics, nor was the town a Catholic one — her Mom and Dad needed to drive twenty miles to attend mass — so Dad had adopted a jokey, ironic front for his faith. "Next year I might give up fast food for Lent." "Oh we don't need to worry about what to believe — we're *told* what to think." He did good works, quietly, simple kindnesses to neighbors and colleagues. Mary had already begun lapsing into agnosticism by the age of fourteen, and she encountered no pressure or reproach from her parents, but where it came to good works, Dad was a beacon to her.

Without the medical attention provided by herself or Gisela or Yukio or Howard, what if others fall ill during the next six months? No longer quite six months — by now a week of that stretch has passed. Just one damn week!

Personally she's rather more bothered right now about the hydroponics. Fluids and nutrition are automated, but the care of carrots and tomatoes and bean sprouts is not her field at all.

What about Sandy's pregnancy? Sandy is on her own, expecting a child, and knowing now that she will have to give birth to it unassisted. What if Sandy develops toxemia? How will she control that? What if she suffers a difficult delivery? What if she *cannot* deliver until reintegration?

How can Sandy be *alone* if a fetus is growing inside her, four months old by now? Did the separation-event treat her and her child as one unit

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— or did the event rip the fetus untimely from its mother's womb, aborting it into yet another copy of the ship, perishing on Sandy's bed-couch? This is too awful to contemplate.

Something else is aboard with Mary. Something quite unlike an angel, and besides she doesn't believe in those.

"*What are you?*" she cries. "*Where are you?*"

Armed with a kitchen knife, she ranges around the great doughnut, searching and finding nothing. It's as though she, the reluctant would-be observer of the Enigma, is always where there's a low probability of finding whatever it is. Where it is, she is not. She can sense a sort of semi-absent presence, never enough for actuality.

Isn't there something called an exclusion principle?

"Maybe you should put youself on tranquilizers."

"No, you must stay alert!"

Maybe she arouses the curiosity of whatever it is yet it wants to avoid harming her. Alternatively, it finds her daunting and, although in a sense summoned by her, it keeps out of her way, sniffing and tasting where she has been.

"All right, you've been alone for a fortnight now. Twenty-two more weeks to go. People have spent far longer periods on their own without all the amenities *you* enjoy!"

Movies, if desired. The hustle and bustle of actors. Any number of computer games. Virtual reality sightseeing, VR adventures. Whatever, whatever.

She tried to watch *The Sound of Music* as a safe choice in the rec room, but she couldn't concentrate. She dares not enter a virtual reality — the Enigma might creep up on her while she is immersed.

"All those people who spent time alone: they still knew that other people existed in the same world as them. I know the contrary!"

"Mary, Mary, how contrary, how does your garden grow?"

"So many bean sprouts already! Do I harvest them? I hate bean sprouts. Give me the deluxe meals any day." More than enough of those to make every day a special occasion. "Why shouldn't I hog on those?"

"Why not cook something special for yourself?" The frozen food store

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contains a wealth of raw ingredients in case the vacuum-packed foods somehow fail, or pall.

"Since when was I a chef? It's stupid cooking for one."

"Cook for me too."

"This sensation of something unseen sharing the ship with me — I can't tolerate it for months on end!"

"Even if the sensation may be preferable to total isolation?"

"*Show yourself to me!* In a mirror, if you can't manage anything more substantial."

And there the Enigma is, in her cabin's mirror.

But it is herself that she sees.

Maybe the Enigma is floating directly behind her back, tucked out of sight. Abruptly she shifts aside. Oops, a little surge of nausea. Oh the Enigma is too quick for her by far.

She cannot catch it full-frontally. She must seek it by indirect means. Mary must practice a sort of Zen art of not-looking, not-seeing.

AS A PSYCHIATRIST Mary understands the principles of meditation and she has even practiced a bit in the past. The silent, empty ship is an ideal focus of vacancy. Session by session — interspersed by more mundane tasks — she blanks her personality. After each session she surfaces to rediscover herself, the only consciousness hereabouts, a mind amidst a void.

Is there a risk that she may remain in tune with the void until her motionless body starves to death? Grumbling guts recall her to activity — so far, at least.

After many days of annulling herself....

A perception emerges from the medium through which the *Pioneer* travels.

<<You believe that your identity is confined here in this ship.>>

Well yes, she does.

<<Fundamental being is forever transforming itself. Think of bubbles in boiling water. Think of flames in a fire. Think of weather cells in an

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atmosphere. Being is the process, not the particulars. Its facets constantly manifest themselves only to disintegrate and then reintegrate.>>

Such is the perception that scrutinizes her.

<<You are a bubble of mind, a tongue of living flame, which might last for a hundred orbits of your world around your sun, a mere moment of cosmic time. But you are also one facet of a hundred-fold being, the crew of this ship. This hundred-fold being has separated itself from a many-billion-fold being — which you call Humanity.>>

A many-billion-fold being?

<<Humanity from the dawn of consciousness until final demise exists as a four-dimensional blaze of members arising and dying and replacing themselves, all linked, ever loosening, ever relinking, within which flickers your own particular flame.>>

Why is she being told this? Does it help, or is some godlike entity inspecting her coolly? Alternatively, is she hallucinating?

<<Realize! From birth to death an intelligent planetary species is a single mental entity, its mentality made of all the minds that compose it. Individual units of Humanity process tiny parts of its totality. Each individual is part of an eon-spanning exchange of information — unaware of this except in rare moments of insight. Or outsight. Beatific moments, poetic moments, shamanistic, hallucinatory. You often misinterpret such partial, fleeting glimpses as encounters with Gods or spirits or ghosts or fairies or, more recently, encounters with flying saucer folk.>>

"Tell me more."

<<During the millions of years of its existence the species-entity may remain alone. Such beings are few and far between in space and time during any mega-era. Even so, their number is considerable overall, for the present universe was spawned from a parent universe, and in turn gives rise to daughter universes, a great tree of universes.>>

This is big stuff. Is she capable of imagining all this on her own? Quite possibly. Why should a godlike entity bother to communicate with her?

Ah, but an answer comes.

<<Some planetary species send parts of themselves through space on a journey lasting generations to the worlds of other stars, creating an offspring of themselves. Some of these offspring encounter an alien species and the two beings either destroy or corrupt one another or else

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become a hybrid. A very few planetary species send the exiled part of themselves not through ordinary space but through the underlying space of probabilities — and here they encounter its entities, as you do now.

<<Your ship is not yet far from its home. You are still entangled. The entity, Humanity, can now be recognized and addressed. And if addressed *now*, Humanity as a whole is also addressed in the past and in the future.

<<*Was, is, and will be.*>>

Mary has had a vision. What is she to make of it?

Is she and is everyone else who ever lived, or who will live, only so many iotas in a single entity spanning millions of years? By traveling through Q-space, has she encountered a higher entity — and caused Humanity to be contacted in the past and the present and the future? On this, um, higher level of metaconsciousness, to which individual persons only ever have fleeting and partial access at best?

If *Pioneer* had never been built, nor some similar Q-space ship in the future, humanity would probably have remained isolated and uncontacted. Yet because contact occurs now, contact also applies retroactively. Total-Humanity may understand this paradox, but it fazes Mary. No individual human being has ever or will ever be aware of more than a jot of the communication between Pan-Humanity and the Probability Entities. This will elude mere people, much as the betting on a tortoise race eludes the tortoises. Or perhaps that should be: a race between fireflies.

Mary feels she is like a single brain-cell present during a few moments of a symphony.

If the hundred copies of the *Pioneer* do reintegrate successfully in another five months' time, and if she announces her revelation, will psychiatrist Mary be for the funny farm?

The air in her cabin smells musty. Surfaces look dusty.

Quite nimbly, in the circumstances, she rises from her lotus position. With a fingertip she traces a line across her com-console.

God almighty, the *date display*....

The date, the date.

Q + 178.

Q + 178.

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A hundred and seventy-eight days, very nearly six months, have passed since the *Pioneer* entered Q-space and she found herself isolated. Mary has been advanced through time itself. She has been extracted and reinserted later, abridging her lonely journey from months to days.

"Oh thank you!" she cries into the silence. "Thank you so very much!"

Yet now there's no sense of Another on the ship with her.

Full of wonder and gratitude, she sets off to check on hydroponics. What a riot of life and death she finds there — rot and fecundity, the air so heady and reeking. Is it possible that Gisela and Eric and all of her colleagues may also have been advanced through time?

Including Sandy, no longer condemned to give birth all alone?

Mary muses, in the dispensary. If the hundred *Pilgrims* do reintegrate successfully, and if her ninety-nine colleagues have *not* been blessed as she has been, what may the medical team need to provide quickly in the way of sedatives or stimulants or vitamin supplements?

Of a sudden the warning siren blares automatically, *whoop-whoop-whoop*, such a shocking hullabaloo that her heart races.

Thank god for it, though, thank god. She has fifteen minutes to return to her cabin and tether herself. Should she bother to do so, or simply stay here? If Gisela or Yukio are in this dispensary she might bump into them, disastrously. Her cabin is safer.

The cabin writhes, as before. Every surface shimmers. It's as if her eyes are watering. Then all is clear and sharp again, her photos, her mobile, her terminal.

Com Sherwin's voice comes briskly. "All hear me. Re-emergence from Q-space achieved. *Pioneer* has acquired Tau Ceti space."

Acquired, acquired! *Pioneer* has acquired a whole new solar system. And rejoice, Mary has regained her fellow human beings!

"Tau Ceti 2 is visible at 9.8 A.U."

Have her fellows arrived here with a skip and a jump, or the slow way?

"Fellow pioneers, we were all separated — for which there may be various explanations."

Yes? Yes?

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"I hope we are all together again. I see that the main bridge team is with me, at least. All non-flight personnel proceed to the restaurant right away for rollcall. Dr. Suzuki is to be in charge of rollcall. Back-up is Major Pine. Second backup is Dr. Santos. Preliminary debrief to follow later. Do not close your cabin doors after you leave. Medical team, check all cabins."

Good thinking. If Chika is not available, Jay-Jay will tally numbers. And if Jay-Jay is not present, Carmen will co-ordinate. Some people may not be able to leave their cabins. How long has Com Sherwin had to think about contingencies?

"Proceed. Bridge out." He has not said whether he himself spent months in Q-space — or only a single month followed by a couple of days.

People emerging into the corridor. Heartfelt greetings. Some tears of relief.

"*Denise,*" Mary calls out, "*how long were you in Q-space?*"

They embrace. "Oh Mary, it felt like forever! Six long months."

"Were you alone all that time?"

"Entirely."

"You, Carmen, how long?"

"Six shitting months. I must get to the restaurant, Mary."

"Of course."

Babble, babble as people proceed as instructed. Eric's cabin is further away around the doughnut out of sight. Be methodical: check inside each cabin even if a door is wide open. There's Gisela in the distance, opening a door and popping inside. Despite instructions a few people may have shut their doors unthinkingly behind them. Here's a door that is closed, belonging to: **Sandy Tate**. Sandy, Sandy! Mary knocks, calls her name.

Freckled, ginger-haired Sandy is sitting on her bed-couch, a swaddled baby held in her arms. She hugs it to herself protectively. Protectively? — no, it looks more as if Sandy is *restraining* her baby — and it barely a week or two old.

"Mary, thank god, I'm going crazy — "

"You did give birth! All on your own — that must have been utterly grueling and scary. But you did okay?"

"I managed — I read up all I could beforehand."

"Well done, Sandy! I'll examine you and your baby as soon as — "

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"Mary, this baby is trying to talk to me!"

"To talk?"

"I don't understand him, but he's trying to."

Is Sandy suffering, understandably, from delusions?

"He can't talk, Sandy. A baby's brain isn't fully grown. Learning to speak simply can't clock in so soon, and would be totally pointless because it's physically impossible for a baby to vocalize. You see, its larynx is in the wrong position. For the first nine months the larynx is high up, locked into the nose, so that a baby can drink and breathe at the same time without choking."

"I'm telling you he's *trying!* I didn't say he can *manage* it."

The months of loneliness, the fear and worry, the need for another person to communicate with....

"Sandy, you're misinterpreting the noises he makes."

"I am *not* misinterpreting."

"Let me see him, Sandy."

As Mary sits on the bed-couch beside her, Sandy flinches. Then she reveals her child, a bundle of feeble struggle which, at presumably blurred sight of a person new to its world, produces sounds that are indeed unlike any regular infantile crying or red-faced bawling. It's as if a strangled voice, using an unknown language, is heard through distorting filters and muffles.

"Sandy, I should tell you something — " How can Mary take time out just now to tell about her own relevation, and her translation through time? "He does sound different, Sandy, I agree! At a quick glance there doesn't seem to be anything physically wrong with either of you.... Do you think you can get to the restaurant?"

"I'm his restaurant," she says. "If he had teeth, he'd bite."

The baby certainly does seem assertive.

"What have you called him?" Mary asks gently.

"He calls me — but I don't know what he wants to say."

"You must have thought of a name beforehand. Boy or girl, whichever."

"James."

"Hi, James."

Those strange noises, as if in reply.

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"How about bringing him to the restaurant? I think that's important. Important, yes. And you need to mingle again."

"Where's Jeff? Why isn't he here? That's why I waited. Is he dead?"

"You heard Com Sherwin's instructions. Jeff will be waiting for you at the restaurant."

"Why didn't he come here so we could both go together?"

"Maybe he expected to find you at the restaurant. Come on, Sandy, chin up."

"I can't take my baby there — he's a monster."

Post-natal depression? Not necessarily.

"If James seems a bit odd, Sandy, I might — just might — know the reason, but I need to explain to all the others too. You've coped splendidly so far. Come on, it's okay."

ALL IS NOT quite okay. An American physicist, Greg Fox, is dead. Appendicitis, says Gisela. Must have been agonizing. Did Greg manage to lay his hands on morphine, maybe an overdose? Post-mortem will tell. He has been dead a couple of months. Unpleasant corpse to find. And one of the Japanese is deeply disturbed, mumbling in his native language, English now eluding him. How shall Mary cope with him? With appropriate drugs and with Yukio's help as translator, she hopes.

The assembled crowd, not least Jeff, are delighted to see a baby born on board. People mob Sandy, causing her to hide James from curious eyes. Jeff definitely ought to have gone to her cabin first. Now Sandy seems ambivalent toward him. She feels betrayed by him — which he cannot understand. Maybe she feels betrayed by what his seed wrought in her.

"Listen up," Com Sherwin calls out to the assembly. "We came through." And he has maintained his grizzled crewcut between whiles. "We sustained one fatality. Six months' surprise solitary was tough on us all, right?"

"Wrong," Mary interrupts. "Not on me."

Sherwin grins; his blue eyes twinkle. He's effervescent. "Dr. Nolan, we cannot all be psychiatrists."

"That is not what I mean...."

* * *

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When she has finished speaking, her colleagues stare at her in a silence that continues for quite a while.

"And there's one other thing," Mary adds, moving closer to Sandy and child. "Sandy believes that her baby is trying to speak already, and I think she may be right...."

Two bombshells, the second less appreciated than the first, at least to begin with. Has Mary flipped? is what people are visibly thinking. Eric eyes her with particular concern.

"Do you have any hard proof of this?" Com Sherwin asks. "Not that I'm doubting what you *experienced*. Still, it's a large claim."

"I can't prove it, although it's true. Little James here may throw some light on this, as time goes by, when his larynx shifts. And maybe not."

"*Mary, why didn't you tell me this right away?*"

"*Yeah, why not?*" Jeff joins in on Sandy's complaint, to exonerate himself for not thinking to be with her as soon as possible.

"If we could harness this effect — " says someone else. Mary can't see who.

"I don't know that it's something we can harness," she tells whoever. "It was granted to me." "Granted" sounds a bit messianic.

"And to no one else," she hears. "Why not?"

"Maybe it's because of the way I meditated. I emptied myself. Then it was able to communicate."

"And to jump you through time." Resentfully: "Why not us? Didn't you ask the same on our behalf? "

"I didn't *ask* it to jump *me*. I never imagined such a thing was possible."

What Mary has said is at once overwhelming and embarrassing. She's distanced from everyone else, as sole recipient of a revelation and a boon.

Although what strange gift might Sandy have received, in the shape of James?

"I think for the time being we must take what Dr. Nolan says at face value," Sherwin declares judiciously. Quite! Suspicion of lunacy mustn't deprive them of a key medical person. "No doubt what Dr. Nolan has told us will fit into context sooner or later. We'll talk about this at greater length once everything's less confused. Meanwhile, we should inventory

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the ship, calculate what we each used and work out how much has come together again — try to get a practical handle on what happened. Something measurable."

Of those present, it transpires that only Sherwin himself and Chika and John the climatologist thought to log every last item they used by way of food and drink.

"Is that information still in the ship's memory?" asks Chika.

Indeed, what data *is*, from a hundred separate journeys, fifty years' worth of overlapping auto-logs plus whatever data individuals may have entered?

Pioneer continues inward toward the position which the second planet of Tau Ceti will occupy many weeks hence.

The ship's log contains backup after backup of status data that seem to vary in only minor respects, occupying megabytes of memory. Computer has no explanation for this massive redundancy. It runs diagnostic checks, and megabytes are dumped into cache. Could Computer be in any way compromised by an encounter with Dr. Nolan's supposed probability-entity? Apparently not.

Eric works overtime putting the hydroponics area to rights. Naturally his own Q-space version was maintained in apple pie order. Sad to see it become so chaotic.

"I should have done more," Mary says ruefully.

"Then this would have been two percent tended. It wouldn't have made a great deal of difference."

"And I didn't know what to do."

"Do you think that announcing your experience straight away was the best course?"

"If I waited longer..."

"...the more difficult it would become?"

"By the way, you guys, I happen to have been contacted by a Higher Entity — but I didn't feel like mentioning this until now. Also by the way, I traveled through time."

"You're probably right. Though now some people are a bit wary of you."

"Does that include you, Eric?"

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"Of course not. This must be such a strain for you."

"And you are loyal to your friends. Do you truly believe me?"

"That's an unfair question, Mary. If I had experienced what you experienced — what you *undoubtedly* experienced...."

"There's no doubt in my mind, but that's only *my* mind."

"Is your experience repeatable — I mean, by someone else?"

"We aren't in Q-space any longer."

"On the way back if we all meditate the way you did maybe we can all take a short cut. Or many of us can. That would be a blessing."

"Shall I start up classes in meditation?"

"Ah...but we might begin colonizing the second planet, depending on what we find."

If that happens, eventually only the flight crew will return *Pioneer* to Earth to bring more material and colonists and frozen embryos and such. Mary's experience may be of no use to the majority of those presently on board. It can be set aside for a long time yet, unconfronted.

Offers flood in to time-share James, but Sandy will have none of them.

Chika Suzuki gives a lecture on his idea of what may have happened, and how it might be avoided in future if only a starship's computer itself could be a quantum computer.

Sum over Paths. Some Overpaths.

"I'd say we experienced traveling a hundred possible paths between the solar system and Tau Ceti. A myriad other paths got explored at the same time, but since those were absurd we could not experience them. If only we could experience the sum over paths collectively together, not separately the way it turned out! Yet that might have been an experience the individual human mind couldn't cope with. All of us experiencing each other's experience...."

Not everyone wishes to marginalize Mary's revelation as something at once too huge and too fugitive to contemplate. Dr. Yukio is fascinated. As an insight into a situation where the specialist in afflictions of mind has herself become afflicted? Chika Suzuki is also enthralled. What Mary says about the multi-million-year mind of all Humanity whenever processing information through its myriad units dead and living and yet

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unborn — this stirs his programmer's soul, whether he gives her credence or not. Likewise, astrophysicist Denise. And a biologist, Maxim Litvinov. And Sophie Garland, another cybernetics person who is an ordained pastor of the Ecumenical Church. Last but not least — perhaps last yet least as regards stability — there is Hiroaki Horiuchi, the chemist who flipped during solitude but who is now responding quite well to mental stabilizers and is coherent in English once again.

Eric, alas, remains ambivalent. In a sense he's a glorified gardener who values neatness and order, nature methodized, not rampant across the eons and imbued with some kind of transcendent mentality, at least as regards the human species. Furthermore, Eric is a no-frills evolutionist. For him life has no goal other than life itself in its many forms during all of its eras. Not that Mary claims that Humanity writ large has any particular goal, yet now that the Higher Entity has intervened — retrospectively as well as in the now and in the henceforth! — it certainly seems as if some kind of destiny is implied, or at least an upgrade to a higher level of existence or state of awareness.

Mary's supporters hold study sessions with her, and Hiro's presence seems therapeutic for him. Exploring Mary's experience helps Hiro come to terms with his own phantoms and demons — though he might be imprinting on Mary emotionally, as his sensei of sanity, or the opposite.

Three of Mary's co-explorers are Japanese. Yukio remarks that his own people feel a strong sense of themselves as a unique collective entity, so they can empathize with the concept of Overlife, Pan-being, or whatever.

The interest of these six does indeed support Mary, otherwise she might be as lonely now as she was during those initial weeks of isolation in Q-space — she might be the specter at the feast of renewed companionship. Even so, sometimes she feels like screaming out to the entity that shifted her through time, *Come back! Please show yourself to more than merely me!*

Meanwhile, Sandy puts a brave face on being mother to a baby who is evidently abnormal, although bursting with health. It's as though a perfectly normal baby has been overwritten by a program that cannot yet run in him — not until he matures a bit more — yet which nevertheless

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keeps trying to express itself, and testing its environment...maybe modifying its environment as it does so, tweaking developmental pathways? Jeff does his best to help nurture their son, frequently taking James off Sandy's hands — to the botany area and to the rec room. Just as he ought to. Fair dooze, sport. No other couples have yet conceived. Potential parents are awaiting what James may become.

WEEKS LATER, *Pioneer* enters orbit around Tau Ceti 2, eighty kilometers above what is basically a world-ocean girding half a dozen scattered and mottled distorted Australias, all but one of them situated in the temperate zones. The odd one out straddles the north pole and wears an ice cap. River systems are visible, and mountains, one of which is smoking vigorously, an eruption in progress. Elsewhere, a typhoon is blowing. The planet seems lively; not overly so, it's to be hoped. The signatures of vegetation are down below, so at least there is botany. Where there is botany, zoology too? Very likely marine biology at least, but no moon pulls any tides ashore.

After three weeks of intensive global survey work Jay-Jay will pilot Shuttle One, *Beauty*, down to the land mass already dubbed Pizza, the result of a random computer selection from a list of names suggested by all personnel and okayed by Com Sherwin. In time, hopefully, people will be able to feed upon Pizza if its soil proves amenable. Accompanying pilot-geologist Jay-Jay will be Maxim Litvinov, Jeff Lee, and John Dolby, representing life sciences and climate.

To gaze upon an alien world, from the bridge or onscreen, is riveting. Those warped Australias are like presents under the Christmas tree. What exactly is in them? What is the topping on Pizza?

The answer, three weeks later, proves to be weed — thongs, tangles, ribbons, bladders, variously jade-green and rusty-red, bright orange and emerald in the light of Tau Ceti. Suited and helmeted, Maxim describes the scene that is onscreen everywhere throughout *Pioneer*. (The three passengers on *Beauty* had tossed the only coins within light years for the honor of being first-foot on the new world. Pilot excluded. Mustn't risk him.) *Beauty* rests upright on an apron of flat rock amidst assorted

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vegetation, a vista that looks somewhat like an offshore domain that has been emptied of its water. The actual shore is a couple of kilometers away. Shouldn't be hard to hike there. Some of the weed piles a meter deep but whole stretches are as flat as a pancake.

Cautiously Maxim pokes around with a probe. Amidst a larger mass of weed he soon comes across a number of little hoppers and scuttlers — "they're a bit like fleas and tiny crabs — " and even captures some specimens, before he cuts samples of weed, then bags soil that is variously gritty and sludgy, inhabited by some wriggly tendrils and purple mites.

John descends from *Beauty* to join Maxim, carrying an atmosphere analyzer to confirm orbital readings. This done, Jeff comes bearing a white mouse in a transparent light-weight habitat. Mice are biologically very similar to men. Will the mouse, Litmus, turn virulently red or blue because of hostile microorganisms? Even if nothing obvious happens, in another few days once back on *Pioneer* Litmus will be sacrificed and dissected.

After a day of intensive investigation of the vicinity, next day Maxim and Jeff set off for the seaside under gray clouds. Rain will move in later, though nothing torrential. What will they find? Leviathans cruising offshore like mobile islands? Torpedos with flippers and goggly eyes nursing pups on the beach?

No. No.

"Weed and sand. Pebbles and boulders." As is seen onscreen while Maxim pans his camera.

Some great thongs of weed emerge from the breeze-rippled sea, right across the shore and beyond, like vast creepers that the ocean has rooted upon the land. No wildlife bigger than hoppers and scuttlers and sliders, and nothing in the empty and now melancholy sky.

Presently Jeff fires nets into the sea, one to trawl, the other weighted to dredge. What comes back are floaters and wrigglers and squirmers, none bigger than a little finger.

Back on *Beauty* in its resealed habitat Litmus the mouse is still perky and white.

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The day after, Shuttle Two, *Charm*, lands half a world away in a broad river valley on the huge island or mini-continent christened Kansas, somewhat further inland than *Beauty* landed. Weed webs its way from the river over the terrain, yielding to flexible dwarf ribbon-trees and inflated lung-plants. More little hoppers and scuttlers and variations, nothing big.

All in all this is wonderful, if a bit bleak. Here on Tee-Cee, as the planet is coming to be called, is an ecology, primitive but functional. Years ago it was decided that biological contamination of the Tee-Cee environment is of much less consequence than the chance of inhabiting a whole new world, if at all possible. After all, the expedition had cost its partners upward of forty billion dollars. Agronomy experiments get under way, a range of seedlings transplanted directly into the local soil and also into heat-sterilized grit and sludge under protection.

All of this rather puts Mary's revelation and baby James to the back of people's minds, except for the members of the support group consisting of Yukio, Chika, Denise, Hiroaki, and Sophie. Plus an apprehensive Sandy with James in a head-supportive carry-sling. Jeff being down on the surface has robbed her of his help, an unavoidable repeat of his earlier failure to be present. And there's Eric too, although in his case simply out of loyalty. But no Maxim. He's on the surface of Tee-Cee. The eight — or nine, if James is counted — meet in the hydroponics section, like conspirators or members of a cult. Maybe their infant messiah is in their midst, albeit inarticulate as yet.

"We are each other," says Hiroaki. "That is the meaning. The unity of all human life."

Sophie asks him gently, "Were Adolf Hitler and a rabbi in an extermination camp *united*? What about people waging ruthless war on each other throughout history?"

"If our immune system goes wrong, it can attack our own bodies. But I am talking about lives going way back and stretching far ahead. I am my ancestor and my distant descendant! If we could know the lives of the future! Pan-Humanity already includes those future lives."

"Future lives haven't yet been lived!" protests Denise. "If we could dip into them now, why, everything is fixed in advance unalterably. It would only be because of our blindness to the future that we bother to do

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anything at all in the present. No, wait: we couldn't even choose to do, or not to do, something if all is foreordained. Pan-Humanity can't be calculating or thinking or dreaming or doing whatever it does across the millennia unless genuine changes happen within it! Otherwise it would be just one big super-complicated thought, a four-dimensional abacus forever in the same state."

"What *is* its purpose?" asks Mary. "What does it do, what does it dream?"

"Maybe it merely exists," says Eric. "Maybe that's all it does."

"Surely it must come to conclusions. The computing power it has! Using all our billions of brains!"

"Conclusions? Final extinction is conclusion enough. The tree grows, the tree dies."

"Maybe," suggests Chika, "it avoids extinction by being closed in upon itself. Its end and its beginning join together. So it always exists, even though time moves on beyond the epoch of its physical existence."

"Contacting the probability-being must have caused a change — "

"As soon as this happened, it had already happened long ago too — "

"We don't have the minds to understand this — "

"Only the overmind possesses the overview — "

"It must understand existence. Not just experience existence, but *understand* as well — as part of its process of existing — "

"We are all part of God," Sophie declares. "Any highly evolved species is a God in total. Yet we cannot follow God's thoughts. All of us are just little bits of those thoughts."

"The probability-being was a bit more forthcoming!"

"Because you weren't a part of it, Mary. Because you were its modem to our God, our species. It had to exchange signals through you."

"And then it went away, because chatting to me was probably as interesting as talking to an ant."

"At least it lifted you from one end of the branch to the other."

"So effortlessly. If only our God would do the same for us."

"Maybe," Sophie suggests, "you should pray real strongly, Mary. Sort of meditation with a punch to it."

"What should I pray *for*?"

"For James," says Sandy. "Let him be — "

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"—normal?" asks Sophie. "Or gifted with tongues, real soon? So that the babe begins to speak instead of just gurbling at you?"

"I think...normal."

"Normal would be a waste, don't you think?"

Sandy sobs. "How long's Jeff going to be down there?"

"It's why we're here."

"Let me take James off your hands for a few hours," offers Sophie, not for the first time.

"No...." Only Jeff is permitted to share her baby, because it is his duty to.

Whatever happens, Sandy seems very unlikely to harm her baby. If she does so in any way, then that is Mary's responsibility. Mary feels she cannot intervene too intrusively, having, as it were, a vested interest.

Some of the seedlings fail, but most survive, even quite a few of those which are fully exposed to the Pizza environment. Some even thrive. Monitor cameras record efforts by hoppers to snack, and one definite quick fatality, although most nibblers quickly hop away into weed. In a bottle of formaldehyde the dead hopper is an amulet of hope. Perhaps. Supposing that hope equates with the superiority, or at least resilience, of organisms from Earth.

Litmus remains perky. *Beauty* returns to *Pioneer*. Time for intensive lab work, and confirmation of results by Computer.

Many tests have been performed, many protocols faithfully obeyed, but there comes a time when a volunteer must personally dip his toe into the bathwater. In the middle of Kansas, Jeff removes his helmet. Computer has approved, although approval is merely advisory. Despite Jeff's best efforts at child-sharing, maybe he is betraying Sandy yet again by being a hero.

The supporters' group join hands in hydroponics and pray for Jeff, even though by now they remember that they are perhaps no longer part of the processes of humanity, being altogether too far away.

"It smells sort of sweet...and sort of musty too, a bit like rotting wood."

Jeff breathes for five minutes. No sudden sneezes. Resuming the

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helmet, he wears it inside *Charm* for three boring hours. Nothing untoward happens to him, so he unsuits. Saliva and mucous swabs and a blood sample taken by Gisela seem normal under the microscope.

"We appear to be lucking out in a big way," Com Sherwin tells everyone.

Charm is the ideal isolated quarantine facility. Jeff and Gisela and tubby agronomist Marcel Reynard and pilot-geologist Werner Schmidt take turns working and exploring outside fully suited. Aboard *Charm* Gisela mixes a fecal sample with a sample of local soil and organisms; some of the organisms die. After a week Jeff ventures outside to breathe the air of Kansas for several hours.

Three days later Jeff drinks boiled, filtered Kansas water. Gisela tests and retests his urine. Two days afterward, he is wearing a coverall rather than a suit when outside. Ungloved, he has already handled samples of vegetation inside the shuttle, and no rashes resulted. Now he handles living vegetation. On the soil he deposits a fecal sample he brought in a bag, marking the spot with a day-glo flag. What may the hoppers and scuttlers and sliders make of this offering if they had any glimmering of true consciousness rather than mere programmed instincts? Evolutionarily speaking, the equivalent of God-like beings have descended from the sky. Next day, inert hoppers and sliders lie nearby — the food of the Gods, or rather the waste products, were too much for them.

James's developmental pathways must indeed have altered; his larynx is descending early. Beware of the risk of him choking. Connections in his brain may be proceeding more rapidly — he looks alert, bright-eyed, on the verge of what exactly? No longer does he attempt in vain to vocalize, as if he has come to some understanding with himself, or of himself. What a patient, amenable baby he is now, and still so young. He stares at his mother, and at Mary too, and at the members of the supporters' club, which is his supporters' club as much as it is Mary's.

The third shuttle, *Color*, has gone down to join *Charm*, to erect a habitat-dome for thirty persons along with a solar power plant and a number of wind-power whirlies.

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Only now, perhaps, are many potential colonists beginning to appreciate the full implications of a whole future spent on Tee-Cee. Sure, there will be much scientific stimulation. Sure, there will be a wealth of human cultural resources on tap for entertainment. Sure, more colonists will arrive from Earth within, say, two years at the most, counting in time for mission assessment and the turn-around of *Pioneer*. But oh, the comparative barrenness of Kansas...!

"If we go down there...," says Sandy.

"Not if, but when," says Chika. "We didn't actually think this would happen, did we? I confess I didn't, not in my heart. The planet wouldn't be habitable, or there would be alien viruses we couldn't cope with. But it is, and there aren't."

Sophie tries to sound a bright note. "In another hundred years there will be human cities. Networks. People whose *grandparents* were born on Tee-Cee Two."

"For us," says Sandy, "just work work work. A few days' hike in any direction for a working holiday if we're lucky. Lots of trips to the seaside for me. We'll be sacrificing the best of our lives."

"That's why we *came* here," says Mary. "We're *pioneers*. Your Jeff especially."

"Easy for you to say! You won't be stuck here. Com Sherwin is bound to take you back through Q-space in the hope of a shortcut through time for anyone aboard. If that can't be cracked, isn't six months' solitary going to be a bit of a disincentive to those who'll supposedly follow us? Well, isn't it?"

"Do you mean...you think there might never *be* another shipload of colonists? Surely not! Even if people are obliged to endure isolation en route, they'll still come. At least they'll know they have a secure destination!"

Eric eyes Mary uneasily. "I wonder if *I'll* be taken back. Normally I would have expected to go back to look after the hydroponics, but there can't be much point if there are eight or so different versions of *Pioneer*. Com Sherwin is almost bound to take you as ship's doctor rather than Yukio."

"Even if I have nobody to doctor but myself? Talk sense."

Eric nods. "Because of your other possibility."

The Commander must be haunted by decisions he has yet to make.

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Maybe this is why, after a long and inconclusive interview with Mary months ago, he has not discussed her revelation again with her in any depth. Something new may yet happen to her. Or if not her, then as regards baby James.

DENISE HAS GONE to the surface. From now on her astrophysics will be restricted to the close study of Tau Ceti, which is important, of course. Sunspot cycles, the wind from the new sun. Jay-Jay has deployed an instrument platform in orbit for her to uplink with, but habitat-tending work will occupy much of Denise's time.

It'll be another month until a second habitat-dome is erected, and several more whirlies, time enough one hopes for any teething problems with the first habitat to become apparent. Since a habitat does not need to be sealed off fully from the environment, problems should not be too serious. The air and the water freely available down on Tee-Cee Two are such a boon, as is the soil in which crops can grow. Genetic engineering may not be necessary at all. Unprotected fields of lupins may provide fodder, and some beauty. Frozen embryos of pigs, goats, and rabbits may be quickened and brought to term in the artificial wombs all the sooner. And chickens hatched. And ponds dug for carp and trout — and a network of irrigation channels.

James will have chicks and bunnies and piglets as part of his nursery experience.

The pioneers were prepared to provide full protection to the tithe of terrestrial life they brought with them. This would have limited the options. Now, not so.

Sophie conducts a multi-faith ceremony of thanks and blessing, although God is absent, or at least extremely diminutive, if God is the collective superconsciousness of the whole human race.

A husband and wife team, Bjorn and Heidi Svenson, vets who will be in charge of husbandry, visit Mary in the clinic. Heidi has brought a urine sample.

"You're pregnant. Definitely!" Mary tells Heidi joyfully. "Oh, congratulations!"

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Turns out to be only a week ago that the Svensons engaged in something of a marathon, six times in two days at mid-month in Heidi's cycle. If James was ever a jinx, that jinx is exorcised now that Tee-Cee promises fertility. In place of a certain apprehension is an eagerness to bear the first child on an alien world. It's early days yet to be sure how viable the Svensons' embryo is, but Heidi does not intend to keep quiet about it. Next day, another husband and wife and a pair of Afro-American partners visit Mary for the same test. The former have not conceived, but the latter have succeeded. With luck James will have peers not too much younger than he is.

Mary and Sophie and Hiroaki and Chika, and inevitably Eric, are taking a coffee break in hydroponics, perching on the sides of plant-troughs, their backs brushing the emerald foliage of carrots and the stalks of tomato plants bowed by bright red globelets.

Sandy comes in at a pace that risks balance-nausea, James swaddled tightly in her arms as if he might fall and break.

"*He started speaking — !*" She displays her child, who gazes at Sophie, then at Mary.

What the baby says is: "I am a Voice. I answer. Ask me."

And Mary asks, "*What are you?*"

"I am a Voice of the linking to All-Humanity. The echo of the event in what you call Q-space. I am a Voice left behind." *Sandy's baby is actually talking to them.*

Its tones are somewhat squeaky.

"*Why* were you left behind?"

"As a Guide to what is and what may be."

"Shouldn't we get the Commander here?" butts in Eric.

"Not yet, not yet," says Hiroaki, eager for enlightenment.

A Guide to what is....

"Do you mean," Eric asks, "you can tell us, for example, whether Tee-Cee is as suitable for us to colonize as it seems to be?"

"Maybe the problems are within yourselves. You are all too special. Specialists, multi-specialists. Over-endowment oozes from your fingertips, from the pores of your skin. Better to have sent here a hundred trained

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peasants or low-caste laborers for whom the work would mean freedom from the restricting past and who would feel like lords. Tee-Cee is weed, water, dirt. Compel a chess grand master to play nothing but checkers for years."

"*Pioneer* will bring more people here in a couple of years — fewer Ph.D.s, more blue-collar types, I guess."

"Sleeping two to a cabin, like animals in an ark? Will you first founders be their superiors, their directors? Even so, the numbers will still be too small."

"Another ship will be built — more ships."

"Requiring four years each, costing forty billion moneys each? Almost bankrupting the backers? Shall the Earth be taxed dry? Only so, if threatened by certain extinction. If your sun is about to flare. If a dark star enters your solar system. If a big comet passes by and will return in a hundred years and strike your Earth."

"We could fire anti-matter at a comet," says Chika. "Completely destroy it while it's still far away."

Within such a short time-frame what threat could be big enough and certain enough?

Mary recalls. "You — or the being you represent — told me that other species do manage to set up colonies by sending generation ships or whatever."

"Perhaps with thousands of persons on board. Perhaps those species command a much larger energy budget than Humanity. You may be too soon. Premature. Your best effort, not big enough."

"I think," says Sophie, "you're looking on the gloomy side. You've been overhearing people having a few last-minute doubts."

A guide to what may be....

"James, can you foretell the future?" asks Hiroaki.

"I can tell what may most probably be," answers the baby. "The most probable paths. Sometime, within infinity, an improbable path becomes actual. How else could the first parent universe arise?"

"Oh kami kami kami," Chika exclaims, "he's a quantum computer. A hand-held quantum computer — and he's an artificial intelligence too! No, I don't mean *artificial* — he's biological, a biological quantum computer. Of course that's what we all are in a limited sense if it's true that quantum effects create our consciousness....But we don't have access

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to...we aren't linked...we aren't directly plugged in to the background, the big picture...."

"What he is," says Sophie, "is an *avatar*."

"You mean like the face Computer has, if we want to see a face onscreen?"

"Originally avatar is a Hindu term. For an incarnation of a god, a manifestation."

How cautiously Sandy holds on to what is biologically her son, as though maybe she should lay him down among the tomato plants in case her grasp fails her.

"Does he have powers? Can he make things happen?"

"Ask him," says Sophie, compassionate, apprehensive.

Sandy bows her head over her baby.

"James, can you *do* things? Can you...can you make a *bird* appear in here?"

"Mother, I am a Voice, not a Hand that can pluck a creature from one place to another."

"You have hands — two little hands. You do." Carefully she unswaddles a chubby pink baby arm, little fingers, tiny coral nails.

"But I am not a Hand."

"Could you become a Hand?"

"That is a very unlikely path. Then I might not be a Voice."

"Can you see what is happening with Jeff there down on Tau-Cee?"

"I am not an Eye."

Hiroaki interrupts. "Are there any other beings like you that *are* Hands or Eyes?"

James yawns. "I am tired now. This was an effort. I am a baby." His eyes close.

"I got to get a message to Jeff! He must come back!"

"We got to tell the Commander right now," says Chika.

"He's asleep."

"Com Sherwin? How do you know?"

"No. James is asleep."

Sherwin Peterson quickly comes in person to hydroponics after Chika's call.

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"Can you wake him up?"

"I don't think we should," says Mary. "He's fatigued. Let him wake in his own time."

"I can hardly doubt the word of five of you...."

Not unless this is some weird hoax, and what would that serve?

The Commander bangs his fist into his palm as if the sudden noise might startle James awake.

"Let me get this straight. He's saying that this expedition is too soon and too few and the wrong sort of people."

That might be the point of the hoax, is a thought which obviously crosses his mind. Psychological sabotage by a small group of conspirators who wish to avoid effectively being marooned down on Tee-Cee. This feeling might spread like an infection. Let's just do the science, then let's pack up and go home in relative comfort. If the baby wakes up and says nothing at all the hoax will be rumbled within a few hours at most. Yet a seed of, yes, mutiny might still have been sown.

"I am ordering you to say nothing about this until I can talk to the baby myself."

How can he enforce his order? A Commander should not issue orders that cannot be enforced.

"I'm appealing to you to keep quiet for a few hours. How long will it be?" A mother should know. And a doctor should know. Oh yes really, a psychiatrist who claims she met an inhabitant of probability, whose voice this baby now is?

"His brain is altered," Mary says. "I don't know how long he needs to sleep after making a big effort. We might harm him."

"This could harm *us*, Doctor, in ways you mightn't imagine!"

"He's a living quantum computer," says Chika. "Maybe James can help you pass through Q-space again without the same isolation. Maybe he can pull the time-jumping trick."

"And maybe *Pioneer* will slide off the edge of the universe. This ship vanishes, and that's the end of star travel. How do you know this baby isn't some sort of virus that Dr. Nolan's famous super-being inserted on board? Better the devil of isolation than a devil we don't know."

Paranoia due to the strain of command? The weight of responsibility for human hopes and for forty billion dollars.

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"I think we'll have ample time to find out," says Chika.

The Commander squares himself. "We'll all wait. Right here."

"I have work to attend to, Commander."

"What would that be? Reprogramming the computer to accept input from the virus-baby?"

"Of course not. There's a lot of data from the surface to process."

"No one leaves, and no one enters. Make yourselves comfortable." True to his word, the Commander parks his butt on the edge of the big tomato trough, plucks a ripe tomato, grins, bites into it, sticks his other hand in his pocket.

"James should be lying on my bed," says Sandy. "Wait *here*? He's a bit of a weight. Look, I'll take him to my cabin. I guess we can all fit in there. And that'll be more private."

"I said we wait here."

"Com, that's *unreasonable.*"

"In your professional opinion is it lacking in reason?" Sherwin asks Mary. "A sign of insanity? Sufficient grounds for my Second Officer to take over?"

From his pocket, to their astonishment, the Commander pulls a pistol, which he points at Sandy — or at James.

Tightly Sophie says, "I didn't know there were any weapons on *Pioneer.*"

"Sure there are. And on the shuttles too. Kept well out of sight, locked away, available in emergency to certain personnel who are sworn to secrecy. What if we encountered actively hostile indigenes on Tee-Cee? What if a hostile alien entity boards the ship? What if that has happened already?"

It is as if a trapdoor has opened, from which blows a very cold draft.

Com Sherwin chews and sucks at the tomato, and regards the five, and slumbering James. Hiroaki is standing tensely as if calculating whether he can disarm Sherwin.

"Commander," says Mary, "if you put the gun away we agree to stay here and never say anything about this. There might be an accident."

"My child," whispers Sandy.

"Ah but is he or ain't he? How much of him is your child if his brain has been tampered with, as you say? Is he even human if he's actually a

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bio-computer? Some guns came along with us in case of unforeseen emergency. I think this amounts to something of an emergency putting the mission in peril, admittedly in a peculiar way. I would like to be obeyed without argument."

"James may be quite wrong about us being unsuitable settlers."

"In that case, Dr. Nolan, would I let it have a say in how this ship operates in Q-space? As *you* have just suggested, Dr. Suzuki."

"He may have powers," Sandy says.

"That's exactly what I'm bothered about. You people really are blind. Indulged. Let's be patient, let's not leap to conclusions, let's keep hush. I'm the Commander. Some weird baby isn't."

THIS IS ALL very unfortunate. Com Sherwin had seemed steady as a rock. An easy-going rock, you might even say. Ten light years distance from Earth is a long thin thread. Thin threads can snap if tugged unexpectedly. He still sounds composed. Does he not understand that producing a gun to enforce authority seriously devalues his position as well as poisoning the atmosphere aboard? A gun, to confront a mother and baby. He is like a King Herod panicked by rumors of a messiah. It is outside of his scope.

"Whatever happens," Mary tells the others, "we mustn't say anything about this. Understood? This is a can of worms." Can she persuade the Commander to accept counseling?

"Perhaps," suggests Sophie, "I should say a prayer to focus us."

No one else wanders into hydroponics. If someone did, would Com Sherwin detain them too at gun point? He whistles to himself monotonously and tunelessly, as if time-keeping, holding the pistol slackly. Occasionally he answers a message on his com. He eats a couple more tomatoes to sustain himself, a breech of proper conduct — hydroponics is not for anyone to sneak into and snack — but in the circumstances Eric does not demur.

Mary thinks of Commander Bligh and the *Bounty*. And of isolated Pitcairn Island, where the mutineers marooned themselves, not to be recontacted until many decades later, while Bligh and his few rowed

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something like four thousand miles by dead reckoning to regain eventually the bosom of authority. An epic journey, almost equivalent to the crossing of light years. In this case is the Commander the mutineer? On the Pitcairn Island of Tee-Cee does he maroon his crew while the officers make their escape?

By his own lights the Commander may be right to be holding that gun, in case James is a lot more than they imagine. In case James needs to be killed quickly.

Err on the safe side.

After an hour James wakes. With his gun the Commander motions all but Sandy and her baby well out of the way. Hiroaki especially.

"Hi there, Kid, I'm the Commander. I hear you found your voice. That true?"

"I *am* the Voice, Commander."

"I'm kind of upset to hear you cast doubts on our chances of settling Tee-Cee."

The baby peers at him, focusing. "I am realistic. Too few, too soon, too concerned with individuality."

"Pardon me that we aren't a hive. Maybe this is Earth's only chance of having our eggs in more than one basket. Question of available resources and politics."

"So you feel obliged to try to succeed."

"Obliged, right. Now what's *your* agenda? Try to dissuade us? Something important about Tee-Cee? In a squillion years might the weedhoppers amount to more than Einstein and Hawking and Mozart? That it?"

"What are Einstein and Hawking and Mozart?"

"I guess their fame hasn't spread much. We aim to remedy that. Any advice about Q-space? How to keep us all together while we're in transit through your realm? How to speed things up a bit?"

"Would you prefer that a hundred different journeys are undertaken by everyone? And only one actuality emerges? The wave fronts of all the other ships collapsing, experienced subjectively as catastrophe, shipwreck in void, the dissolving of substance and life?"

"You could fix that, could you, given access to our computer and the

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Q-drive controls? Excuse my being confrontational, by the way. Commander's prerogative if a mission seems in danger."

"There are ways to arrange different parameters."

"I guess no one would ever take another Q-space trip if there's a ninety-nine percent likelihood of being annihilated."

"The one percent that prevails becomes one hundred percent. Nothing is actually lost."

"Except that ninety-nine *me*'s experience termination."

"You, who prevail, would not know."

"Okay, I'll take that on board, under advisement. Wouldn't ninety-nine or whatever number of *you* go down kicking and screaming also, in ghost-land?"

"Unimportant. Inessential. The survivor survives. Result: unity. You overvalue the idea of the self."

"There's a real cosmic perspective. Dr. Tate, lay the child down by those carrots, will you?"

"Why should I do that? What's in your mind?"

"Thoughts, Dr. Tate. Muchos thoughts. *Kindly do it now.*"

"I won't. You're mad."

The gun points. "Do it, and nothing bad will happen to you."

"Not to me, but...."

"I'll count to five. At five I pull the trigger."

With greatest reluctance Sandy unslings James.

"Position him so he can see me. Now, back off."

She backs off a pace, another pace. She's tempted to throw herself in between.

"Okay. Voice, can you see me clearly?"

"Yes," says the baby.

"Do you know what this is I'm holding in my hand?"

"A tool that I think can kill."

"Exactly. It fires a bit of metal called a bullet, very fast with a lot of punch. I'm pointing it at your head, which contains your brains. You're an alien infestation. I'm going to count to five and then I'm going to fire."

"Don't do this," begs Sandy. "He needs feeding and changing."

"Should we have a short intermission? No, I don't think so." Sherwin

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starts to count. James stares at him, neither begging nor flinching. When Sherwin reaches five, he pulls the trigger.

Click.

"Gee, the safety is on...." And immediately, "Now it isn't. But the test is over. He's just a Voice, that's all. Unless he's telepathic, of course, but he gave no signs so far. All right, all relax. I'm sorry about this bit of theater. Had to be sure he doesn't have powers."

"And what," asks Sophie, "if he had vanished the gun from your hand? Sent it into the middle of nowhere? What would you have done then, try to strangle him with your bare hands?"

"No. Been very circumspect. I sincerely apologize, people. Middle of nowhere is where we are, or rather at the other end of nowhere, and that's where *he* comes out of, even if he looks like a baby and poos like a baby, a very disarming disguise. I had to be certain what we're dealing with. Exceptional circumstances call for exceptional reactions. What to ordinary souls may appear to be an irrational reaction, right out of left field, may be inspired and correct."

"A commander has to be decisive," agrees Chika politely.

"I was quoting Linda Bernstein. This brings us back to the problem of damage to morale, and what if anything we might do about rejigging the Q-drive."

"You're actually entertaining the idea?"

"How can I ignore it, Dr. Suzuki? I'm not blinkered."

No, but maybe he is on the edge of himself.

"I think we established something important — the baby's limitations, at least at present."

"You were justified," says James. Healingly, perhaps. Or shrewdly.

The Commander tucks his pistol away.

"Okay, Voice, these different parameters that can be arranged...can our ship's personnel all skip ahead through time on the trip back to Earth if we put up with a bit of isolation? Without most versions of us getting extinguished?"

What a gift to science and star travel this will be. And how much more supportive for the settlement on Tee-Cee. Beats harpooning a gas-whale into a cocked hat.

"I am tired again," says the baby.

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"Sandy." Bonhomie, now. "For the moment I want you to keep the Voice out of the way of everyone other than those here present. Will you promise this?"

Of course.

The Commander orders *Charm* to carry a final habitat down to Kansas, and a load of supplies. *Beauty* conveys another thirty settlers to the surface. *Pioneer* is becoming quite empty, and proportionately huger, so it seems. The six, and James, remain aboard as though they are engaged in a covert project. Which of them will be sent down at the last moment? Sherwin must at least already have confided in his Second Officer. He is abridging any planned schedule effervescently. A year at Tau Ceti and all the planetary science work? No, the stay in orbit will be measured in months, maybe as few as two, as though Sherwin is now itching to depart, the sooner to return bringing more settlers and equipment. Colonization is the prime priority. This is proceeding more successfully and speedily than anyone had expected — just so long as no one involved in it hears of the Voice's doubts, not for a long while yet. Colonization must be buttressed, reinforced, ASAP. The toehold must become a full deep footprint.

Jeff still does not know about his son's achievement. Jeff is distant now. Undoubtedly Sandy will stay aboard *Pioneer* to care for James. Her oceanography can wait, and Jeff will have to wait.

Conversations with the Voice continue, in Sandy's cabin. Sophie or Mary frequently stay with James to let Sandy off the leash for exercise and a change of scene, as now. Chika and Hiroaki are also helping baby-sit. The bed-couch is crowded.

"So we are all tiny parts of a vast species-overmind?"

"Yes, Mary," says James.

"What does the overmind do? What is its aim? What thoughts does it think?"

"I do not have access to it. I am only the Voice of the Other, left behind."

"Is there any way a person can access our species-overmind directly and comprehensibly?"

Mary thinks of the angel she once saw. The angel was cobwebs and dew and sunlight.

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"Being enfolded into its psychospace and becoming fully aware: that is a way."

"What does that mean?"

"Ceasing your life in ongoing space-time. All the billions of lives that ever were remain embedded in its wholeness. Like true dreams. Can you awake lucidly within the dream that was your life, once it has ended? Can you edit the life that was yours? Can you rewrite it? Can you corrupt the data of your history recorded in the psychosphere? This may compel the attention of the overmind."

"Could you help me do this?" asks Mary.

"Perhaps."

"He's talking about you *dying* first!" says Sophie. "He isn't saying that you can report anything at all to the living."

"I am talking," says the Voice, "about myself ceasing along with you after I help hoist your mind."

"Hoist my mind? *How*?"

"I can hypnotize you and, as it were, change mental settings."

"Good thing Com Sherwin isn't hearing *this*," Sophie says. "But anyway, we're only talking theoretically. *Aren't we, Mary*?"

Mary nods.

"I would volunteer for this," Chika says softly.

"Only Mary Nolan is suitable," the Voice states, "because her mind already linked in Q-space. And a gap was caused. She went ahead in time."

"Oh, kami kami," murmurs Chika.

"If I can edit my life-data after I die," asks Mary, "do I alter the real events that occurred?"

"Skeins may unravel and reform, within limitations. Threads will shift. A different probability will manifest. The large pattern will remain similar."

"It *is* like time-travel, isn't it? A sort of time-travel? I go back and I do something a bit differently."

"You adjust what already happened and what resulted. Within limits."

"And if the overmind does not agree?"

"It must focus upon you. You who are part of it."

"Can I focus *it* upon what happens in the real world?"

"I do not know this. My brain heats. I am tired. I must cool."

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The final shuttle trips come so soon. *Pioneer* almost empties its stores of supplies. Chika and Yukio, Sophie and Hiroaki are to become settlers.

Hiroaki hangs himself in his cabin. In the partial gravity his strangulation may have taken a while, and perhaps this was his plan — to approach death more slowly so that the boundary between life and death might become as blurred as his vision, allowing him to slip through, to be both dead and alive at once for a while so that he might enfold into psychospace while still fractionally aware. He too was touched by what transpired in Q-space. To a certain extent Hiroaki's mental settings had been changed. Or perhaps he could not bear to be exiled on Tee-Cee, away from the Voice, or from Mary who may attain a kind of satori, if not in this life then in the data-dream-stream of her life, the eddies within the vast river of the overmind.

Hiroaki's death is a shock. Still: balance of his mind tragically disturbed ever since isolation in Q-space. After a brief service conducted by Sophie, his body joins that of Greg Fox in cold store. Sending bodies down to be buried on Tee-Cee would not be a good omen.

"*What did the Voice tell him*?" Com Sherwin wants to know. Has to be something to do with James.

Mary confesses to the Commander. "I think Hiroaki got the idea that he might be able to contact the overmind by dying, because he was touched by it in Q-space."

"Touched, as in loony...?"

"Maybe he couldn't bear to be separated from...."

"From his therapist?"

"No, from what may happen in Q-space the next time."

Pioneer is outward bound. Farewells have been said. In an entirely literal way: fare extremely well...until the starship returns. Which it will, there's no doubting. Especially, don't doubt yourselves. *Charm* has been left in Kansas, almost like an emergency survival hut that can be sealed off, though of course will never need to be. Or like an escape route, admittedly an escape to nowhere. Even so, more reassuring than otherwise: a visible link to space and wider horizons, an earnest of more

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technology due to come. The settlers will now need to acquire a different mind-set, vigorous yet also patient.

Jeff could not understand why Sandy was not joining him. There's one of the settlers already feeling isolated, betrayed as if in tit-for-tat. Although in the end Jeff seemed resigned. Sandy herself cried and needed comforting.

On board are Mary, Sandy and James, and Eric of hydroponics, Com Sherwin and his Second, Max Muller, Engineer Sam Nakata, Navigator Nellie van Torn, Comp and ship-systems manager Bill Brooks, and shuttle pilot Dan Addison. Ten souls, or nine plus something else.

COM SHERWIN is in several minds.

The Voice has decided that if Computer reprograms the Q-drive in such and such a way, then each traveler will find himself or herself accompanied by a copy of the Voice.

How can James be in nine places at once — until, at journey's end, he becomes a single person again? He is not any ordinary baby. He is a child of reality and probability.

The journey time can be shortened considerably — not by time-jumping such as benefited Mary, but by "compression," which James cannot explain in comprehensible words. The result should be a journey time of one month rather than six.

It may be that James's entangled presence will permit a limited amount of communication between the otherwise isolated stellanauts, via him, although such messages may be unreliable, even if comforting. Or otherwise.

Of course, him being an infant, albeit an infant prodigy, his copies will need caring for. How well up on the care of infants are Com Sherwin, Max Muller, Dan Addison...?

The downside is that there will be phantom journeys too, otherwise there would not be enough paths to sum over.

The voice likens those phantom journeys to you standing between two mirrors and beholding repeated reflections of yourself diminishing and disappearing into the distance. The first five or six reflections certainly seem like authentic representations; thereafter you become increasingly vague and distant. Thus it will feel to the phantoms. Seven

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or so will feel like you, and will disperse when you — *or one of the others* — exits from Q-space. Others will not possess enough substance to experience more than a dream-like state, the unraveling of which will hardly be too traumatic.

So there's about a one-in-eight chance that you personally will reintegrate. Seven echoes will hope for this but fail to achieve it. Much better odds than one in a hundred — though even so!

Mary has slightly better odds. If she tosses a dice to decide whether to euthanize herself and James while in Q-space so as to enfold herself into psychospace — by far the best way to choose, namely by chance — and if one of her selves does indeed toss the number for death, then one of her will definitely die but will not have lived in vain, and one of the remainder will survive.

A link may even endure between her dead self and her living self, so the Voice surmises.

"So," says Com Sherwin to those who are all gathered in the restaurant, "do we go for it?"

Is he recollecting the dive of *The Dart* into Jupiter and the harpooning of the gas-whale? *Do I go for it or do I not?*

"I'd like an advisory show of hands. Purely advisory for the moment."

The dissenters are Sam Nakata, Nellie van Torn, and Bill Brooks — engineering, navigation, and computer systems respectively. Com Sherwin may or may not have prevailed previously upon his Second, Max Muller. As a pilot Dan Addison has coped with risks before, and he's rather too extravert to endure another spell of six months all on his own. Mary and Sandy and Eric are united in going for it, although are their votes quite equal in weight to engineering or navigation?

"Well," says Sherwin, "that's five to three in favor, ignoring myself and the Voice."

"Commander," says Sam Nakata, "we have absolutely no reason to opt for this, this *experiment* — on the say-so of a baby! It's our duty to take *Pioneer* back through Q-space by a route that demonstrably succeeds. If that involves six months alone, we already hacked it once. At least this time we're forewarned."

"Obviously he's no ordinary baby. But more to the point, if we cut the journey time by five months each way, that's almost one year sooner we

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can bring more people and equipment to Tee-Cee. Imagine returning and finding the colony falling apart because we didn't take the fast route. I think *that* bears thinking seriously about."

"Yes. It does. *If.*"

"We shouldn't worry about some of us not arriving," says Sandy, "so long as one of each does. We won't know anything about the ones who don't arrive."

"Plenty of fish in the probability sea, eh?" remarks Nellie van Torn. "I don't *like* to think of five of me evaporating, especially if the one who evaporates is *me.*"

"It's an identity problem," says Bill Brooks surprisingly. "If you could copy your mind into an android, say while you're unconscious, and if the act of mind-scanning erases your brain, is the android simply continuing your own life? The android will certainly feel as though it's doing so, indistinguishably. If you were dying of terminal cancer you would opt for this continuation, wouldn't you?"

"Are you changing your informal vote?" asks Com Sherwin.

"I don't like to think that I may be putting ninety-odd other people in jeopardy just because of qualms about myself, when actually my self will survive intact in one version or another."

There is much to mull over. Mary begins giving classes on the medical aspects of infant care, and Sandy on the practical details. James begins hypnotizing Mary.

The time has come. Nellie and Sam have agreed under protest. Computer has accepted complex instructions from James who has crawled and is now taking his first precocious steps. He's also toilet-trained and able to eat mashed pap. In view of his huge linguistic skills he oughtn't to be much bother to look after. On the contrary, a valuable companion.

Mary lies in her cabin.

"Sixty seconds to Q-insertion...."

"Thirty seconds...."

"Fifteen...."

The seconds pass, the cabin ripples, silence from the speakers.

She is alone with the Voice.

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"Can you contact Sandy, Voice?"

The Voice's eyes grow glazed.

"Hi Mary, Sandy and James here, James and Sandy here, We're here. I hear you, You already said, You called me just now — "

Six or seven Sandys are talking through James's lips one after another, all saying much the same thing, wherever *here* may be. Certainly isn't this cabin. A babble of ghosts. These may be difficult conversations to keep up.

"Can you contact *me myself*, Voice? I mean, another me?"

James concentrates.

Presently: "*When* are we going to do it?" Commit suicide, and James-icide — she knows what she means.

"Should we all do it at the same time?"

"Is that really me?"

"We never got a chance like this to discuss things."

"We talked to ourself in Q-space before, but this is very different!"

"Hey, what about our Hippocratic Oath?"

Babel, from James's lips. The nine voices of Mary. Beats schizophrenia any day. This procedure offers very little counsel or comfort, and is perhaps a Bad Idea.

Q + 3. She needn't feel isolated in the ship. She can summon up voices — but it is better not to hear them. Better to be alone with James, the better to concentrate her mind, in case it might fly apart. Doubtless her other selves have decided likewise, since they do not call her. Several Com Sherwins do call, wanting status reports. What is the point of them asking for those? Perfectionism? Several Erics also call, wishing her well, better, best. James is with everyone.

Q + 4. Do it today. Today is a perfectly fine day to end one's life. *One*'s life? What if all of the Maries roll a four, unlucky number in the minds of the Japanese because *shi* which means four also means death, thank you for that knowledge, Hiroaki. What if all or none roll a four? Is Maries the plural of Mary?

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She has brought overdoses of morphine from the dispensary, morphine to send one to sleep, a very deep sleep.

"Are you ready, Voice? Any last wishes? Some mashed carrots?"

Mary is an Angel in a woodland by a tiny lake. And she is also Mary who sees the Angel and now understands what she sees. Her vision spans forward — inside a starship a dark-haired athletic woman is grinning at her.

"To be really aboard at last? Great! Ah, do you mean the motion...? It's okay." The woman swings her head friskily. "Oops."

Switching her attention, Mary sinks to her knees amongst the bushes aglitter with spiders' webs.

"Overmind, Overmind!" The words seem like the start of a prayer, a prayer that can perhaps be answered.

Com Sherwin's voice comes briskly. "Hear me. Re-emergence from Q-space achieved. We're in the home system — we're home. Crew present on bridge: Muller, Nakata, van Torn, and Brook, and me. Call in please in order: Nolan, Tate, Festa, Addison. Nolan?"

"Present, Commander."

Oh yes, what a present. She is alive. Alive.

"Tate?"

Sandy's voice comes over the speaker. "Present. So is James."

James the Voice. James the Link. James the Knowledge.

Eric and Dan Addison also report in.

Glimpses of eons of human experience crash in upon kneeling Mary, rocking her. Billions of souls batter at her like a plague of butterflies. Bird-song sounds like the high-speed warble of data-flow from which an audible message may somehow emerge, if only it can step down to her level.

And she feels such a twinge within, somewhere in her belly, as the glimpses flee, and the butterflies vanish, and the bird-song hushes.

She knows that inside her is the beginning of a Voice.

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FILMS

KATHI MAIO

EMBRACING THE ANACHRONISM

GEORGE Santayana is famously quoted as saying that "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." I'm more inclined to believe that those who cannot remember the past are destined for great careers in Hollywood, making movies about it. And remakes. And sequels. (It's the movie-going public who are condemned—to watch it all.)

Entertaining books like *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies* have done a good job at pointing out some of the historical fallacies in major motion pictures. Therefore, I'll leave it to real historians to pick apart a movie like *Pearl Harbor*.

Factual and timeline inaccuracies interest me less than what a particular interpretation of a period, event, or legend reveals about the people who fashioned that version of the past. To state the obvious (my favorite pastime), the storytellers betray more about themselves and their culture in the telling of their tale than they do about their story's supposed subject.

For example, movie plots involving swords and sorcery, knights (chivalrous and otherwise), and medieval heroes of every ilk have been a staple of the film industry since before it was even recognized as an industry. There are historical anachronisms in all such movies. But the most interesting ones go well beyond whether you spot a zipper in milady's costume. They involve the actual spirit and tone of a film.

I remember loving the swashbucklers of Errol Flynn, watching them on television, growing up. At the time, I didn't question why Robin Hood, a bandit hiding out in

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the forest, managed to look so incredibly *clean*. But Michael Curtiz, et al., weren't really making a film about Jolly Olde England, they were making a movie for the America of the late thirties, and in some ways, *about* America in the late thirties.

Flynn's Robin was well-scrubbed and well-fed. (The perfect hero for a post-depression, pre-war audience.) Fresh-faced, optimistic, and bold. He was the confident American hero, bearing little resemblance to a realistic citizen of the 12th century.

Likewise, Danny Kaye's *Court Jester*, of 1956, is viewed not as an expression of the Middle Ages, but as a vivid "VistaVision" reminder of the heyday of the Hollywood musical and the brilliant career of one of our greatest song-and-dance comedians. To listen to Kaye wrap his motor-mouth around a patter song, or piffle his way through a tongue-twister like the classic "pellet with the poison is in the vessel with the pestle" bit, is to witness genius. Fabulously silly genius, but genius.

Yet as exuberantly unrealistic as *The Adventures of Robin Hood* and *The Court Jester* are, they never break character, or acknowledge their artifice. They offered us a make-believe Medieval age in which they hoped we would be willing, on some level, to believe.

By the time the 1970s rolled around, audiences were more skeptical and sardonic. (Discuss amongst yourselves the impact of the Vietnam War era and world student movements on popular culture.) Epic storytelling was outré. And the bright-colored musical disappeared from the big screen.

It is in this context that the brilliant madmen collectively known as the Monty Python troupe decided to create a marvelous mishmash of Medieval English history and legend in a little film entitled *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975). Gone was the clean-cut and heroic image of Flynn's Robin Hood. Everyone is filthy, slightly disreputable, and more than a little insane in Python's Middle Ages... although King Arthur, a generally well-intentioned fool, is recognized as royalty because "he doesn't have shit all over him."

Neither the filmmakers (Terry Gilliam, Terry Jones, Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Eric Idle, and Michael Palin) nor the peasant citizenry on screen are at all respectful of Arthur and the assorted famous knights helping him to seek a sacred chalice. In one hilariously

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pointed scene, Arthur is berated in a field by a filthy peasant for his "imperialist dogma" and his exploitation of "the workers."

Marxist analysis of the feudal system isn't the only anachronism of *Holy Grail*, of course. The Python lads wear undisguised spuriousness as a badge of honor. We may be lunatics, they seem to be saying, but our beloved British mythology is even more ridiculous. Who'd buy this crap? Not them. And not, they hope, their viewer.

They even gleefully expose their low budget. Instead of noble steeds, Arthur and his sir-knights prance around on foot while flunkies wearing modern backpacks clack coconut shells together and smack their lips to provide horse-riding sound effects.

Python never believes their own make-believe, although they gleefully play with traditional story elements. Their yarn is so patently fake that modern police drive up and bust the whole ignoble lot of them right before they climactically storm a castle.

Clearly, comic anarchy reached a high point with Monty Python. While most movies encourage us to suspend our disbelief, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* dares us to suspend our belief in traditional legend and story-telling, and sit back and enjoy the absurd.

Alas, Monty Python disbanded. And the cultural zeitgeist turned conservative. Hypermasculinity and sensitive new age guydom fought it out for screen time in the '80s and '90s, with a strange and highly unsatisfying hybrid of the two eventually ruling the day. By the time Kevin Costner played *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* (1991) and Richard Gere played Lancelot in *First Knight* (1995), the heart seemed to have died in chivalrous tales. And as for spoofing them, the occasional parody like Mel Brooks's *Robin Hood: Men in Tights* (1993) seemed stupid instead of clever.

But perhaps this summer, we saw a rebirth of the knightly fable: One that captures the energy of the old swashbuckler movie, and does so with a knowing wink at its own artifice.

The first to appear was Brian Helgeland's *A Knight's Tale*, a story about a peasant squire who resolves to "change his stars," and become a knight.

Mr. Helgeland, who won an Oscar for his *L. A. Confidential* screenplay, and then got burned on his directorial debut, *Payback*, set out to make a popcorn movie. And he succeeds.

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First, he avoids the long-in-the-tooth megastars and goes for a comely lad with a youthful swagger. Heath Ledger *(The Patriot)* plays knightly wannabe William Thatcher. With his tousled blonde hair and soulful eyes, Ledger plays a jousting knight like he's a rock star. Or, perhaps, a star quarterback.

And if there's any doubt that the tournament champions of the 14th century were the sport stars of their time, Mr. Helgeland cheerfully whacks you over the head with the analogy. As William enters his first tournament, the nobles and yokels in the stands chant Queen's "We Will Rock You" and do the wave.

Helgeland uses several such in-your-face time-tweaks in his likable film. The ones with music, like a banquet dance set to David Bowie's "Golden Years," work the best. Others, like the mod-medieval costumes and hairdos, most of which look like failing work from a second-rate fashion and hair academy, are less effective. None of these constitute true fantasy elements, since there are no sorcerers casting spells or time travel machines bringing our hero back and forth from modern to medieval times. And yet, there is nonetheless something fantastical about the purposeful use of cultural anachronisms in *A Knight's Tale*.

At times, I wished that Helgeland had gone further with his spoofing. But, all in all, he strikes the right balance. Most movie-goers today want a movie in which they can believe. And *A Knight's Tale* manages to seem sincere, and, at the same time, embrace the anachronisms of a chivalrous tale for the new millennium.

The sincerity is accomplished through some strong ensemble acting, lead by Ledger's hunky hero. Another standout is Paul Bettany who plays, of all things, Geoffrey Chaucer. Helgeland writes Chaucer as an imaginative guy with a compulsive gambling problem. And Bettany plays his first scene as naked as a jaybird, after losing everything — including his clothes — to pay gambling debts. Shanynn Sossamon, who plays Jocelyn, the would-be knight's lady fair, is the film's weakest link. She is attractive in an Angelina Jolie look-alike way, but lacks (at this point in her career) all of Ms. Jolie's fire.

But you can't have everything in a summer fluff movie. At least one that features live actors. That's why I liked another movie even more. And that movie is the

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Dreamworks/Pacific Data Images cartoon, *Shrek*.

Of course, actors were involved in the computer-animated feature — and good ones, at that. Mike Myers voices the title character, a green ogre with a heart of gold and bravery to rival any knight. Eddie Murphy voices the ogre's newfound sidekick, Donkey. And Cameron Diaz plays a princess named Fiona, well worthy of rescue from a dragon keep.

Shrek is an unabashed fairytale with some very modern, touchy-feelie messages about self-acceptance and anti-looksism. It also has some nicely barbed satire relating to the "very clean" Disney empire. And (like *A Knight's Tale*) it also makes some happily inappropriate use of pop songs along the way.

Like the live-action adventure romp that preceded it into theaters, Shrek is unashamed of its modern flourishes. At the same time, especially for young viewers, it works very well as a straightforward and quite funny fable. The animation, coordinated by directors Andrew Adamson and Vicky Jenson, is impressive. And the writing, by a tag team of capable scribes, somehow hangs together despite the many hands at work here.

Shrek learns from the past mistakes of earlier films. It avoids the pious flatness of most Disney features and goes for something endearing, yet tart and sophisticated enough for even the most jaundiced adult. It celebrates the traditional fable, but isn't afraid to admit that this is a very modern movie.

Maybe Hollywood will make Santayana proud yet.

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Neil Gaiman probably doesn't need much introduction to you folks, but just in case you haven't been keeping up, Mr. Gaiman is best known for the Sandman *series of graphic novels. Among his other works you'll find the story collection* Smoke and Mirrors, *his bestselling collaboration with Terry Pratchett,* Good Omens, *the screenplay for* Princess Mononoke, *and the novels* Stardust *and* Neverwhere. *Just published is a new novel,* American Gods, *about which you read last month in Charles de Lint's column. And now we gladly bring you a diabolically clever short-short story.*

Other People

By Neil Gaiman

"TIME IS FLUID HERE," SAID the demon.

He knew it was a demon the moment he saw it. He knew it, just as he knew the place was Hell. There was nothing else that either of them could have been.

The room was long, and the demon waited by a smoking brazier at the far end. A multitude of objects hung on the rock-gray walls, of the kind that it would not have been wise or reassuring to inspect too closely. The ceiling was low, the floor oddly insubstantial.

"Come close," said the demon, and he did.

The demon was rake-thin, and naked. It was deeply scarred, and it appeared to have been flayed at some time in the distant past. It had no ears, no sex. Its lips were thin and ascetic, and its eyes were a demon's eyes: they had seen too much and gone too far, and under their gaze he felt less important than a fly.

"What happens now?" he asked.

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"Now," said the demon, in a voice that carried with it no sorrow, no relish, only a dreadful flat resignation, "you will be tortured."

"For how long?"

But the demon shook its head and made no reply. It walked slowly along the wall, eyeing first one of the devices that hung there, then another. At the far end of the wall, by the closed door, was a cat-o'-nine-tails made of frayed wire. The demon took it down with one three-fingered hand and walked back, carrying it reverently. It placed the wire tines onto the brazier, and stared at them as they began to heat up.

"That's inhuman."

"Yes."

The tips of the cat's tails were glowing a dead orange.

As the demon raised his arm to deliver the first blow, it said, "In time you will remember even this moment with fondness."

"You are a liar."

"No," said the demon. "The next part," it explained, in the moment before it brought down the cat, "is worse."

Then the tines of the cat landed on the man's back with a crack and a hiss, tearing through the expensive clothes, burning and rending and shredding as they struck and, not for the last time in that place, he screamed.

There were two hundred and eleven implements on the walls of that room, and in time he was to experience each of them.

When, finally, the Lazarene's Daughter, which he had grown to know intimately, had been cleaned and replaced on the wall in the two-hundred-and-eleventh position, then, through wrecked lips, he gasped, "Now what?"

"Now," said the demon, "the true pain begins."

It did.

Everything he had ever done that had been better left undone. Every lie he had told — told to himself, or told to others. Every little hurt, and all the great hurts. Each one was pulled out of him, detail by detail, inch by inch. The demon stripped away the cover of forgetfulness, stripped everything down to truth, and it hurt more than anything.

"Tell me what you thought as she walked out the door," said the demon.

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"I thought my heart was broken."

"No," said the demon, without hate, "you didn't." It stared at him with expressionless eyes, and he was forced to look away.

"I thought, now she'll never know I've been sleeping with her sister."

The demon took apart his life, moment by moment, instant to awful instant. It lasted a hundred years, perhaps, or a thousand — they had all the time there ever was, in that gray room — and toward the end he realized that the demon had been right. The physical torture had been kinder.

And it ended.

And once it had ended, it began again. There was a self-knowledge there he had not had the first time, which somehow made everything worse.

Now, as he spoke, he hated himself. There were no lies, no evasions, no room for anything except the pain and the anger.

He spoke. He no longer wept. And when he finished, a thousand years later, he prayed that now the demon would go to the wall, and bring down the skinning knife, or the choke-pear, or the screws.

"Again," said the demon.

He began to scream. He screamed for a long time.

"Again," said the demon, when he was done, as if nothing had been said.

It was like peeling an onion. This time through his life he learned about consequences. He learned the results of things he had done; things he had been blind to as he did them; the ways he had hurt the world; the damage he had done to people he had never known, or met, or encountered. It was the hardest lesson yet.

"Again," said the demon, a thousand years later.

He crouched on the floor, beside the brazier, rocking gently, his eyes closed, and he told the story of his life, re-experiencing it as he told it, from birth to death, changing nothing, leaving nothing out, facing everything. He opened his heart.

When he was done, he sat there, eyes closed, waiting for the voice to say, "Again," but nothing was said. He opened his eyes.

Slowly, he stood up. He was alone.

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At the far end of the room there was a door, and, as he watched, it opened.

A man stepped through the door. There was terror in the man's face, and arrogance, and pride. The man, who wore expensive clothes, took several hesitant steps into the room, and then stopped.

When he saw the man, he understood.

"Time is fluid here," he told the new arrival.

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Carol Emshwiller is the author of such novels as Ledoyt, Carmen Dog, *and* Leaping Man Hill. *She is probably best known for her witty and unusual short stories, collections of which include* Joy in Our Cause, Verging on the Pertinent, *and the World Fantasy Award-winner* The Start of the End of It All.

This lovely new story is actually a sequel to "Foster Mother," which ran in our February issue this year. If it doesn't seem at first to be a follow-up, ask yourself: how easy would it be to identify the gender of a dinosaur?

Creature

By Carol Emshwiller

THIS CREATURE LOOKS more scared than I am. Come knocking...pawing...scratching at my door. Come, maybe in search of me (I'm easy prey for the weak and scared and hungry), or maybe in search of help and shelter.... (I'm peering out my window, hoping it won't see me.) It's been snowing — seems like three or four days now. The first really bad weather of the year so far.

It looks so draggled and cold.... I open the door. I welcome it. I say, "Hello new and dangerous friend." My door's a normal size, but too small for it. It pushes and groans and squeezes itself in. Then collapses on the floor in my one and only room, its big green head facing the stove. It takes up all the space and makes puddles.

There's a tag stapled in its ear — rather tattered (both ear and tag), green (both ear and tag), with a number so faded I can hardly make it out. It might be zero seven. Strange that it has ears at all considering what it (mostly) looks like. But they're small — tiny vestigial...no, the opposite, evolving ears. They look as if made purely as place to put a tag.

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It's wearing a large handmade camouflage vest with lots of pockets. Now, while it's still out of breath and collapsed, I check for weapons, though with those claws, why would it need any? What it has is old dried crumbs of pennyroyal, left over from some warmer season and some higher mountain, a few interesting stones, one streaked green with copper and one that glitters with fool's gold, two books, one of poetry (*100 Best Loved Poems*) and one on plants of the area. Both well worn. A creature of my own heart. Perhaps.

It looks half starved — more than half. I have broth. I help it raise its heavy head. It sips, nods as if in thanks, but then shows its teeth, blinks its glittery eyes. I jump back. Try to, that is, but I bump into my table. There's no room with it in here. It shakes its head, no, no, no. Seems to say it. "Mmmnno."

But how can such a creature talk at all with such a mouth? But then come words, or parts of words. "Thang...kh...mmmyou...kind. Kindly. Thang you." Then it seems to faint, or collapses, or sleeps — instantly — snow melting from its eyelashes (it has eyelashes) and rolling off its back, icy mud drying between its claws. The tiny arms look as if made for nothing but hugging.

While it seems in such an exhausted sleep, or maybe passed out, I take pliers and carefully remove the staple that holds the zero seven ear tag. I notice several claw marks along its back and it's lost a large chunk off the end of its tail.

Now where in the world did this thing come from?

I've heard tales. I thought they were the usual nonsense...like sasquatch, yeti, and so forth, abominable this or that. (And here, for sure, the most abominable of all.) But I've heard tales of secret weapons, too. I've heard there are creatures made specifically to patrol this empty border land. Supposed to be indestructible in so far as a living breathing creature can ever be. Supposed to attack everything that moves in this no-man's-land where nothing is supposed to be but another of its own kind.

I'd probably help even a suffering weapon, I probably wouldn't be able to keep myself from it, but this one seems odd for a weapon, too polite, and with vest pockets full of dried bits of flowers, that book of poetry....

I drink the rest of the broth myself and stare at the creature for a while. No sense in trying to mop up with this thing in the way and still dripping.

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I can't even get across the room without leaning against a wall or climbing over my chair or cot. I step over its legs. I squinch over to my front door. I take my jacket. I'm not worried about leaving the thing alone. It doesn't seem the sort to do any harm — unless by mistake.

I whisper, "Sleep, my poor wet friend. I'll be back soon," in case it hears me leave. It doesn't move. I might as well be talking to myself. I do that all the time anyway. I used to talk to my dog, Rosie, but since she died I haven't stopped. I jabber on. No need for a dog for talking. They used to say we men were the silent sex, at least compared to women, but not me. Rosie just made it worse. She would look up at me, trying hard to get every word. Seemed to smile. I'd talk all the more. And now, as if she was still here, I talk. I talk to anything that moves.

As I go out, right outside the door there's some juniper branches threaded together as though it had made itself a wind shield of some sort and dropped it before it came in. Farther along I see broken branches around my biggest limber pine. It must have sheltered there — leaned against the leeward side. Hard to think of such a creature giving out.

I lean against the leeward side, too. You'd think it would have smelled my fire and me. Perhaps it was already weak and sick. I don't dare leave it by itself for long but I need space. That was like being in a squeeze gate. Still, I like company. Watch the fire together. Come better weather we could make the shack bigger. It was polite, even.

I say, "Rosie, Rosie." The wind blows my words off into the hills before I hardly get them said. That name has already bounced off these cliffs sunrise to sunset. Not a creature here that hasn't heard it. I've called her, sometimes by mistake, sometimes on purpose. Sometimes knowing she was dead, sometimes forgetting.

After she died I ran out in a snowstorm naked — and not just once or twice — hoping for...what? Death by freezing? I yelled, answering the coyotes, until I was so hoarse I couldn't have spoken if there'd been somebody to speak to. After that I whispered. Then I sat, brooding over the knots in the logs as I had when I first came out here. Rosie needed me. She kept me human. Or should I say, and better yet, she kept me animal. I don't know what I've become. I need this creature as much as it needs me. I'd make it a good meal. Maybe that's what I want to be.

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I squat down, my back against the tree. I shouldn't go far. I should listen. Even just waking up and stretching, it could mess things up.

I chose this no-man's land. I came here ten years ago. There's a war been going on for a long time, but never any action here — not since I've been around. Missiles fly overhead, satellites float in the night sky, but nothing ever happens here. The war goes on, back and forth above me. Sometimes I can see great bursts of light. I wonder if there's anything left on either side. No man's land is the safest place to be. Had I had the sense to bring my wife and child here, they'd still be alive. Of course I didn't think to come here myself until they were gone and my life was over.

I DON'T KNOW how long I sit, the sun is hidden, but I've had no need for time since I came. I don't even keep track of my age, let alone the time of day.

I've never seen a single one of these thick-skinned things until now. I wasn't sure they existed. I didn't want them to. I felt sorry for them even when I didn't believe in them. How can they have any sort of life at all? Seeing this one, I think perhaps they can. (Or this one can.) But here they are in the world in spite of themselves. No fault of theirs. And in all kinds of weather. If they get sick, I suppose they pine and die on their own.

The creature seemed...rather sweet, I thought. Fine fingered hands. Womanly arms. Perhaps it really is female.

Then I hear the scraping and thumping of something who hasn't hardly room enough to turn around. My poor friend, Zero Seven. I hurry back as best I can, clumping through snow a foot deep in spots. I open my door and go from a wall of softly falling flakes (softly *now*) to a wall of shiny green.

I push my fist into its side as one does to move a horse. I hope it feels my push. I hope it's as sensitive as a horse. "Let me in, friend."

It moves. I hear something falling over on its far side.

"Do gum in. I'mmmm afraig I.... Mmmmm...as you ksee."

I slide myself in — scrape myself in, that is, it's the wrong direction for the scales.

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It turns toward me as best it can and seems to almost bow, or perhaps it's a nod, one elegant little hand at its mouth as if embarrassed. I do believe I'm right about the sex. It must be female.

"Kh kvery, kvery, sssssorry. I'll leave mmmm-nnnow."

With me in the way it can't turn around to go. Perhaps not even with me not in the way. It'll have to back out.

"Don't go. Sit down." It's in a half crouch already. It goes down into a squat, its stomach on the floor, feet splayed on each side — long-toed, gruesome feet with claws I wouldn't want to argue with.

I slide myself around the creature to the stove on the far side. I should have had the dishes washed and put away. Well, no matter, they're tin. A few more bumps and scratches won't make any difference.

No doubt about it, it's sick. I could even feel that as I move around it. Though how do you know if a reptile is sick? But there's an odd stickiness to it and I imagine it normally doesn't have any smell at all.

"Stay. You're sick. I'll make stew. Rest again."

It shakes its head. "Mmmmmukst go."

"I don't want to find you out there dead."

"Dhuh dhead in here iks worssse for mmgh...mmyou."

It shows its teeth. There are lots of them. Is that a grin? Can that be? That the creature has a sense of humor? Rosie seemed to grin, too. I take a chance. I laugh. It opens its mouth wider but there's no sound. We look each other in the eye. Some kind of understanding, lizard to mammal, passes between us. Then the creature shivers. I pull a blanket off the bunk, big Hudson Bay, but it only covers the creature's top half like a shawl. It helps to hold it on with those tiny arms, and nods again.

"I'll build up the fire and get us something to eat. You just rest."

"I hhhelp-puh."

"Please don't."

It grins again, mouth wide, that row of teeth gleaming, then huddles close against the wall opposite my kitchen area, trying to make itself small. Still, I step on its toes as I work. When I do, we both say, "Sorry." "Khsssorry." We both laugh.... Well, I laugh and it shows its teeth.

How nice to have somebody...some*thing* around that has a sense of humor. They must have left in some odd rogue genes by mistake.

I start to make stew. I have lots of dried chanterelles and I hope it likes

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wild garlic. It watches me as Rosie did, mouth open. I hum a song my grandma taught me. I thought hardly anybody knew that song but me, but then I hear the creature buzzing along with me, no doubt about it, the same song. I look at it. It blinks a slow blink, as if for a wink.

We eat my hare stew, it out of my wash basin. Licks it clean like Rosie always did. At least it hasn't lost its appetite.

"Have you a name other than that Zero Seven on your tag? By the way, I took that off. I had a dog, Rosie. She died. I keep almost calling you Rosie by mistake. It's the only name I've said for years."

There's that smile again. "Rrrrosie is kfine. Kfine." Then Kfine turns into a cough. I heat up some wild rose hips tea. I always have lots of that.

Then it stretches out again. I pile on more blankets.

"Mmmmmnnno mmno. Mmdon't."

"I insist. You must stay warm. If the lamp doesn't bother you I'll read for a while, but you should sleep. I'll make the fire high. Wake me if it gets cold. You should be warm.

(My lamp is just a bowl of volcanic tuff with exactly the right hole in the center. I have a big one and a little one. The oil I've rendered even from creatures with not much fat. Even deer.)

I settle myself with a book. I like having company even if the company takes up most of the room. I think it's already asleep, but then, "Khind, kh hind ssssir. I like being Rrrrrosie." (It gargles it out as if it was French.) "Bhut who are mmmm kh you? *If* khyou don't mmmmind."

"Ben. I'm Ben."

"Ah, easy khto kkh ssssay."

I think: She. She is a she.

When I douse the lamp (by putting on the lid) and it's pitch black in here, I do have a moment when I worry. She *is* starving. I might be her next meal and a better one than I've prepared for her so far, or at least bigger. What's a little broth and then a little rabbit stew? But I won't be facing anything my wife and child didn't face already though my fate might not be as instantaneous as theirs. But I hear her breathing, snuffling, snorting in her sleep just like Rosie. I'm comforted and reassured by her snores.

Sometime during the night the snow stops. Dawn, in my one and only window, shows a cloudless sky. I watch the oblong of sunlight move down

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and across the far wall until it lights on her. She's a bundle of blankets, but what little I can see of her shines out. Certainly she's not made for a winter climate. Probably most comfortable in a hot place with lots of shiny green leaves to hide in.

She feels the sun the moment it touches her. (Thick skinned but infinitely sensitive.) Turns and looks at me. Grins her Rosie-grin. Like Rosie she doesn't have to say it, it's all over her face: Hey, a new day. What's up now? And: Let's get going.

"You look better."

She nods. Says, "Mmmmm, nnnn. Mmmmm, nnnn."

"We'll go out, if you like. You must feel cramped in here."

"Mmmmmm, nnnn."

I've jerky and hard tack. We breakfast on that, and more rose hip tea — a pitcher of it for her.

"Keep a blanket around your shoulders. And I think you'll have to back out."

Like my Rosie was before she got old, this Rosie peers, sniffs, hops up on boulders, jumps for no reason whatsoever, she skips in the bare spots where the snow has blown off. Sings a ho dee ho dee ho kind of song. A young thing that, sick or not, starving or not, can't sit still. I saw that in my boy.

I take her to my viewing spot. You can see the whole valley. I often see deer from here.

As we watch, another of these creatures comes down the valley heading south. I haven't seen any until this one sitting beside me, and here comes yet another, and then two more not far behind. Driven down from the mountain passes on purpose? Or is it the cold?

We watch. Not moving. Rosie looks at me, at them, at me. I love that look all young things have, animal or human, of wondering: What's up? What's going on? Is everything all right?

Then those first two turn and trumpet at the others. Rosie's arms are just long enough for her to cover her ears. (She must hear extraordinarily well to need to do that from way up here.) Hard to tell from this distance, but those others all seem much larger than she is.

When, a moment later, she takes her fingers from her ears, I ask her, "Have you had experiences with others of your own kind before?"

She nods.

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"The scars."

"Mmmnnn."

"You weren't supposed to fight each other."

"Mmnnnn."

I want to comfort her. Put my arms around this green scaly thing. (My son had an iguana. We never hugged it.) She reaches toward me as if to hug, too. But even those little arms...those claws..... And my head could fit all the way in her mouth, no problem. I flinch away. I see her eyes turn reptilian — lose their wide childlike look. She says, "Kh...khss sssorry."

"No, it's I who should be...*am* sorry."

I reach and I do hug and let myself be hugged. I get my parka ripped on her claws. Well, it's not the first rip.

Far below us, the things fight and trumpet, smash trees, trample brush. I can see, even from up here, spit fly out. There's no blood. Their hide is too tough.

They fight with their feet, leaping as cocks do. One is losing. It's on its back, talons up. Even from way up here, I can see a little herd of panicked deer galloping off toward the hills. Rosie covers her eyes this time and leans over as if she has a stomachache. Says, "Mmmmmmmmnnn. Not Kkkh kkh krright."

"What *were* you supposed to do?"

"Kkh...khill.... Mmmm those like kh you. Khill you."

Below us, the creature that was on its back tries to escape but the others leap high and claw at it, pull it down, then one bites the under part of the neck. Now there *is* blood.

I turn to see Rosie's reaction, but she's not here. Then I see her, way, way back, curled up behind a tree.

I go back to her. I put my arm around her again. "Old buddy." Then, "How did you ever turn out as you are?"

"Mmmm mmistake.

"Gh gho," Rosie says, carefully not looking down at them. "Ghho. Mmmmnn...*mnnnow!*" And she's already on her way, back to the shack. I follow. Watching her. Her arms, so like ours, look like an afterthought. Obviously there's a bit of the human in her. I see it in the legs, too. Also in those half-formed ears.

Those others below could push down my shack in half a minute. I

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need Rosie on my side. "Stay. I need you. I'll push out a wall. I'll make the door bigger."

She stops, stares. I wish I knew what's going on inside that big fierce head of hers.

"I'll start getting the logs for it today."

"I kh...kh...khelph."

But my food won't last long with her eating washbasins full. Besides, she's starving. We'll have to get food first.

"How have you lived all this time? What have you eaten?"

"Ghhophers mmm mostly. *When* mmmwere gh hophers. Khrabbits. When them. When kh llleaves, leaves. Mmmmushrooms. Rrrroots. Mmmm-bark nnnot good but kh ate it. Khfish. Hhhard to kh kfish when kh h ice."

We climb higher than my shack so Rosie can fish. The streams up there are too fast to freeze over. She uses her foot. Hooks them on a claw. Her arms seem even too small to help with balancing. It's her big green head and the half of her leftover tail, waving from side to side, that balances her as she reaches. She gets seven.

"Kkhfried?" she says. "In khfat? With khh kh corn mmmeal? Like Mmmmmama? Mushka?"

"You betcha. You had a mama?"

"Mmmmmnnnn. Mmmmmm. Mmone kh like mmyou."

She bounces off down the path ahead of me, singing an oolie, oolie, doodlie do kind of song. I guess she's no longer sick. Or she's too happy to care. And certainly not thinking about those others fighting in the valley.

(I'm carrying the fish. I strung them through their gills on to a willow stick. I hadn't brought my stringer. I guess I don't have to worry about getting enough food for her. Yet she *was* starving. Perhaps she doesn't like things raw?)

Back home we eat fried fish. I eat two and Rosie eats five. She watches as I cook just as the dog did, exact same expression, mouth half open. A dog sort of smile. We settle down afterward and I read to her from one of my books: Moby Dick. (I only brought three.) I read that to my son and wife, one on each side of me, and all of us on the couch. Rosie lies, head toward me, eyes almost shut, commenting now and then, her voice breathy, like one would imagine a snake would talk. I'm sitting on my cot. We sip our rosehips tea. We're both covered with blankets.

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Then, "Time's up," I say. "You need sleep." But she doesn't want us to stop reading. "I insist," I say. She groans. "*I* kh kread. *You* ssssleep." She reaches for the book with those womanly shiny green fingers. I put it down and take her hand. "Ooobie baloobie, *do* it," I say. (Ooobie baloobie is another of her songs.) She laughs. (It's more like panting than laughing, but so hard I think she must be little more than seven years old — her equivalent of seven — to think that's so funny.) But she settles down right after. Says, "Kh...koh khay." Wraps her little arms around herself. I tuck the blankets closer and douse the lamp with its lid.

This time I don't worry if I might be her next meal, but I have a hard time sleeping anyway. I keep wondering what might happen if those others find my shack. They could break it down just leaning on it by mistake.

Since *they* all seem to be coming down, we'll go up. We'll take some supplies to the pass and hide. I've spent the night there many a time. We'll be all right as long as there isn't another storm that goes on for days and days. At least we'll have fish.

I always did like camping out. The view is always worth more than the discomfort. Besides I do without right here every day. It never bothers me, washing up in a washbowl or an icy stream. Only here is it worth the bother of looking out the window.

Or now, at Rosie, too. She really is quite beautiful, her yellow underbelly and the darker green along the ridge of her back. She's even reddish in spots.

Rosie hears them first, wakes me with her, "Kh...kh...kh." There's sounds of crashing through the brush. A tree splintering. From the look of the big dipper, straight out my little north window, it's probably three or four A.M.

They're coming closer. For sure they saw our smoke and smelled us. They push on our walls. I hear them breathe and hiss. No, it's only one, I *think* only one, pushing the wall on one side. The caulking falls out. Rosie braces herself against that wall to hold it. She picks up the rhythm of the other's pushing, leans when it pushes. It works, the wall holds. At one point there's a large hole where the caulking's gone and I see the creature looking in — one light greenish eye like Rosie's. The thing gives

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a throaty hiss. Rosie answers with the same hiss. It gives up. We hear it smashing away. We look at each other.

"You did it!"

Rosie's mouth is open in that smile that looks so much like my old Rosie's and she nods yes so hard I'm thinking she'll put her neck out of joint. "Kh khdid! *Khdid!*"

"Pack up. We'll go camp out up beyond where we fished."

She goes right for the frying pan and the bag of corn meal and puts them in her vest pockets. She's still nodding yes but she stops when I tell her we have to bring blankets and a tarp.

"Kh...kh...kh.... *Kno! Nnnnnooo!*"

"*Yes!* It's colder up there. You need shelter as much as I do. Maybe more so."

Like Rosie, she gives up easily. "Kh...kh-kho kay." I don't know what I'd do if she didn't. She helps me roll the blankets in the tarp. Says, "I kh kcarry mmmmthat."

I have to stop her from taking her books and her fancy green rock. She insists she can carry all the things we need and those too.

"I kh *likhe* ghrrrrreeeen."

"That's good. Then you like yourself."

SHE STARTS UP, hop, skip, and jump...even with all that to carry. I can't believe it, she's leaping from rock to rock — even across talus. I keep telling her that stuff is unstable. "Dangerous even for you," I say, but she does it anyway. The rocks do teeter, but she's sure-footed. That leaping doesn't last long, thank goodness. She doesn't realize how much all that weight she's carrying will tire her. I warned her, but since when do the young listen to warnings of that sort? She's jumped and skipped and leaped until now she lags behind and blows like a horse at every other step. I take the tarp and blankets from her. I'd take that frying pan, too, but she won't let me. "Kh...kan do it. I *kan!*"

I don't let Rosie stop until the halfway spot. "We'll get up where we can see," I say, "then we'll rest."

"Oh pf...pfhooo," she says, but she goes on, sighing now.

"You can do it. Fifty more steps."

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* * *

A few minutes later we put down our bundles, Rosie takes off her vest, and we climb out to the edge of the scarp we just zigzagged up to see what we can see. And it's as I feared, they've found my cabin. Looks like there's not much left of it already, walls pushed in, roof collapsed. I had doused the fire but there must have been some cinders left. A fire has started, at the cabin and on the ground around it.

She sits as I sit, legs hanging over. How much like a human she is. Sometimes you don't see it at all, but in certain positions you do. Now she looks as if she's going to cry. (Can they cry? Only humans, seals, and sea birds have tears. Anyway, you don't need tears for sadness.) I feel like crying, too. Rosie can tell just like my old Rosie could. We lean against each other.

"At least your stones are all right."

She doesn't even answer with an mmmnnnn.

I look to see if any trees are waving around down there from being bumped into, but there's nothing. Odd.

After we start on up, Rosie is droopy, not only tired but sad. She thunks along. I feel sorry that she jumped and hopped so much in the beginning. My other Rosie was like that. She never realized she had to save her strength.

Most of my talking has been to keep her going. "Count steps. Maybe a hundred more." "Come on, poor tired friend." "See that rock? We'll stop just beyond that." Now I mumble to myself — about when I'll be back to sift through my things. I didn't bring any souvenirs of my wife and child. When I fled out here...escaped...I didn't even want pictures. I was running away from memories. Of course memories come and go as they please.

Just around the corner and we'll be able to see the little lake I'm heading for, the stepping stones crossing the creek that pours down from it, beyond, the trees and boulders where I had hoped to hide us this first night, but I decide we have to stop now. We stand...that is, *I* stand, Rosie collapses. We're both too tired to get out food other than jerky. I tuck Rosie in under an overhang. Just her big back end with the half bitten off tail hanging out. I cover her with blankets and the tarp. She's asleep before she

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can finish her jerky. I pick the chunk out of her mouth to save it for breakfast.

In the morning I wake to the sound of a helicopter. I know right away. Why...*why* didn't I suspect before? Rosie not only had an ear tag, but she has a chip imbedded in her neck.

There's no place for a helicopter to land, the mountains are too closed in and too many boulders, but we're not safe anyway. There could be more things in Rosie's neck than just an ID chip. That could be why we didn't hear those creatures down there anymore.

Rosie's in an exhausted sleep. "You have to wake up. *Now!* I have to get your chip out." I don't mention what else might be there. Those others may have been disposed of...without a trace, I'll bet. Or little traces scattered all over the place so no one will know there ever were creatures like this.

"Did you know you have a chip?"

I feel around Rosie's neck.

"Hang on, friend, this will hurt."

I don't care about those others, but I'd never like the forest without Rosie in it, skipping and hopping along, picking flowers, collecting green rocks or glittery fool's gold, singing, "doodlie do" songs.

She looks at the helicopter, then at me, then the copter again, then back at me. Again it's that: Should I be frightened or not? Except now *I'm* frightened. I try not to show it but she senses it. I see her getting scared, too.

The copter circles. I have to hurry — but I don't want to hurt her — but her skin is so tough! And who knows, if I do find one or two things, will that be all that's hidden there?

"Hang on."

She hugs herself with those inadequate arms. Even before I start she makes little doglike...or rather, birdlike sounds.

"Sing," I say. "Sing your oobie do."

I feel two lumps. I dig in. I say, "Almost done," when I've hardly begun.

Then we run. Without our blankets, without our food, except what Rosie has in her vest.

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"They can't follow now." I *hope* that's true.

We stick to the old path that circles over the pass. We try to stay close to rocks and under what trees there are. Even running as we do, I can't *not* think about how beautiful it is up here. When I first saw it, years ago, I shouted when I came around the corner.

She's way ahead of me in no time — those long strong legs. And we're not carrying much of anything. I catch up when she finally turns to look for me. We both look back. The helicopter still hovers. I left the chip and button bullet back there at our camping spot. They think she's still there. Maybe they don't know about me.

She's different from those others. What was she for? That is, besides killing those like me?

It starts to snow. Thank God or worse luck, I don't know which. It'll hide our tracks and the helicopter won't fly, but we don't have food or blankets.

We cross the pass and dip into the next valley. We find a sheltered spot among a mass of fallen boulders where the whole side of a cliff came down. Some boulders are on top of each other making a roof. Boulders over, boulders under — not a particularly comfortable spot but we huddle there and rest. We take stock. All we have is what's in Rosie's vest, a little leftover jerky (we eat it), the frying pan, and cornmeal. We can make corn cakes if we don't catch fish.

This is just a mountain storm. If we can get far enough down we'll walk out of it. If we're lucky it'll last just long enough to cover our tracks. I tell Rosie. She lies at my feet still panting. I stoke her knobby head.

"How's your neck?"

"Hh...hoo khay."

She sleeps. Murmuring a whole series of Mmmms and then, Mmmush, and, Mmmushka.

As the storm eases and we're some rested, I wake her and we start down. After an hour we're out of the snow and wind and into a hanging meadow. I've been over this pass but not this far.

I'm worried. Rosie is sluggish and dreamy, flopping along, tripping a lot. Poor thing, all she has on is her vest. She's cold and with reptiles...or part-reptiles.... I don't want to build a fire but I must. The copter's gone, maybe it's all right to now.

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"My poor fierce friend," I say. She grins. I take her hand and sit her down. "We're going to have a nice big fire. You rest. I'll find the wood."

"I'll hhh...hhh...hhh."

"No you won't. I'm going by myself. I'll be back before you know it."

She mews, turns away, and curls up.

On this side there's a lot less snow, so not hard going. I gather brush, dead limbs, and drag the whole batch back to her, flop down, my arm around her. I see her eyes flicker, though the nictitating membrane closes as she does it. She doesn't wake. I'll have to make the fire right now.

How does a sick reptile show how sick it is? All I know is, she doesn't look right and doesn't feel right.

I build the fire as close to her as I dare. Finally she seems in a more normal sleep. I sleep, too.

I wake with a start. *Hibernate!* Do they? All those others, too. But she's been mixed with other genes. For sure, some human.

I wake her by mistake as I get out the frying pan and the cornmeal. I'm melting snow, first to drink and then to make corncakes. She drinks as if she's been out in the desert for days. Then, "I'mm mmhungry." Then she sees what little cornmeal we have and says, "Mmmm *nnnot* ssso.... *Nnnot* hungry," she says again. "Ooobie, baloobie, *nnnnot*."

"Ooobie, baloobie, *do* eat me. Roll me in corn meal. I'm old and I'm tired."

All of a sudden it's not a joke.

"Kkkh kkkh! Kh khcan't dooo that! Oooooh!"

"I thought that's what you were made for...born for."

"Kkh can't."

"You'll die. Look how thin you are."

"I'mmm tem *po* rary. Temmm *po po* rary." She sings it like a song — like she doesn't care. Does she understand what it means? I wonder if it's true. Perhaps they all are — were.

"Mmmmmm *all* temmm *po po!* rary."

"What makes you think you're temporary?"

"Mmmmush kh knew."

"She *told* you? How could she!"

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"Kkh kh *nnnno!* I sssaw kher eyes. Sssscared. I kh khfound out. I kh...kh...kread."

"You're only half grown."

"Have a kh kh tth timer."

I don't know what I see in those lizardy eyes of hers. "Don't you like it here? Don't you care anything about being alive?"

"Oh! Kh! *Oooh!* Kh!" She does a hopping, twisting dance, those tiny arms raised. It tells how she feels, better than her words ever could.

"Mmmmy kh heart," she says, "hasss kth th timer."

"How long is temporary?"

"I sh should dannnce. Ssssing. *Mnnnow!* And llllook. Lllook a *llllot! Yesssss!* Lottts. Mmm then kh kgo for goood mmmmbig bh bones."

We'll build another cabin. Here in this hanging valley, sheltered under boulders and trees and next to a good fishing stream. With her help we'll have one up in no time. We'll dance and sing and look around a lot. At the smallest and the largest...the near and the far...stars, mountain peaks, beetles.... ☙

"Every fifteen minutes it dashes around looking for the cheese."

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SCIENCE

PAUL DOHERTY & PAT MURPHY

UNDER PRESSURE

IT'S 2001. Time to reflect on Stanley Kubrick's movie *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Remember the scene where HAL, the massively conflicted ship's computer, locks astronaut Dave Bowman out of the main spacecraft? Dave is in a small space pod and he needs to get back into the ship. But HAL won't open the pod bay doors — even when Dave says "please!"

Dave's wearing a space suit, but he doesn't have a helmet with him. To get back into the ship, Dave uses the manipulator arms of the pod to open the outer door to an airlock. Then he opens the hatch on the pod. The escaping air blasts him across the vacuum of space into the evacuated airlock. There Dave closes the outer door, repressurizes the airlock, and gets back into the ship to continue the movie.

In many other movies, people exposed to the vacuum of space swell up as their blood boils beneath their skin. So what's the deal? Did Arthur C. Clarke get it wrong? Is Dave's feat physically possible?

If you're interested in the answers to these and other strange questions (like why was Paul faced with a raw egg for breakfast on a trip to Ecuador?), read on. In this column, we explore the effects of changing air pressure — including boiling blood. We'll start on the surface of the Earth and head up to Mars and beyond.

THE WATCHED POT

Before we can get to boiling blood, we need to talk about boiling in general. Imagine that a pot of water is heating on the stove. Hey, if you're home, go get a pot of water and put it on the stove. You're going to boil this water and notice what happens along the way. But

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first, consider the pressure on both you and that water.

The surface of the Earth is at the bottom of an ocean of air. The Earth's gravity pulls that air downward. Consequently, all the air that's up above you pushes down on you and on the water in the pot. How hard does it push? If you balanced a two-meter-long piece of iron rebar on the palm of your hand, the pressure exerted by the bar would be about equal to atmospheric pressure at sea level. Pressure can be measured in units called atmospheres. At sea level, you experience one atmosphere of pressure.

Now suppose you turn up the heat under that pot of water. While the water starts to heat up, think about evaporation. At the surface of the water, molecules of water are making the transition from liquid to vapor in the process called evaporation.

As the water heats up, not much happens at first. Then you hear some popping and snapping noises. If you look at the bottom of the pot, you can see bubbles form. They start to rise but they collapse before reaching the surface. These collapsing bubbles make the sounds you are hearing.

As the water gets hotter, the bubbles rise further and further before collapsing. Finally, they reach the surface. When the bubbles start breaking at the surface, the sounds quiet down. At this point, all the water in the pot has reached at least 100 degrees Celsius, the boiling point of water at one atmosphere of pressure.

Water can evaporate at any temperature, but under one atmosphere of pressure, it doesn't boil until it reaches 100°C. What's the difference? In evaporation, the change from liquid water to water vapor happens at the surface. When water boils, that transition happens in the fluid below the surface. In boiling, bubbles form within the water.

A fluid's vapor pressure is a measure of its tendency to change into a vapor. Vapor pressure increases with temperature. A fluid boils when its vapor pressure equals the pressure of the surrounding gases.

The higher the pressure on the surface of a fluid, the harder it is to form bubbles of vapor inside the fluid. To make the bubbles form, you can heat up the fluid and increase its vapor pressure. On the other hand, you can also make a fluid boil by decreasing the surrounding pressure. Let's consider that option.

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Going Up?

When Paul was in Quito, Ecuador, on his way to climb a mountain called Cotopaxi, he ordered eggs for breakfast. When the waiter asked "*¿cuàntos minutos?*" Paul (proud of his few words of Spanish) answered "*cuatro minutos, por favor.*"

When his eggs arrived raw, Paul's physics professor brain clicked into action. (A little late, true.) In Mountain View, California, where Paul lives, water boils at 100 degrees Celsius. Eggs cook to Paul's liking in four minutes. But Quito was at an altitude of 10,000 feet. With the lower atmospheric pressure, water boils at a lower temperature — about 90°C.

Cooking time is very sensitive to temperature. When you cook an egg, you are denaturing the proteins — that is, breaking the weak chemical bonds that hold the protein molecules in a particular structure. The denaturing of proteins is an exponential function of temperature. Drop the temperature by ten degrees Celsius, and you quadruple the cooking time.

At 20,000 feet, where the boiling point is 80°C, cooking food takes sixteen times as long as it does at sea level. That's why Paul, like most mountaineers, brings precooked freeze-dried food or foods that only need a few minutes in hot water to rehydrate. (Mountaineers who cook "real" food at altitude bring pressure cookers with them. Inside these pressure cookers, the pressure builds up to twice the atmospheric pressure at sea level, increasing the boiling temperature and reducing the cooking time.) Paul sticks with precooked foods, saying that the possibility of a pressure cooker accident in a tent is too messy to contemplate.

As a mountaineer, Paul has dealt with other consequences of high altitude. At sea level, dry air is twenty-one percent oxygen. At 15,000 feet, the air pressure — and the amount of oxygen in each breath — is half what it is at sea level. Rise quickly to 15,000 feet and Paul says you will know what it feels like to have one lung ripped out!

The next time you drive up into some mountains and reach 9,000 feet above sea level or higher, notice how you feel when you stop your car and get out. If you have not adapted to altitude, you may feel weak and dizzy. If you go higher, the effects become more serious. Watching tourists step off a bus at 15,000 feet in Lauca National Park in Chile, Paul saw one man immediately pass out from lack of oxygen.

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Given time, the body can gradually adapt to altitude. Within hours of moving to a higher altitude, the heart beats faster and breathing becomes deeper. Within weeks, the blood becomes thicker with oxygen-transporting red blood cells.

Mountaineers must learn how well and how quickly their bodies adapt to altitude. Paul has learned that he can go to 9,000 feet his first night and then climb 1,000 feet higher each day.

If you go high too fast, you can suffer the nausea and headaches of Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS). If you ignore the warning signs of AMS and stay too high, the consequences can be lethal as your lungs fill with fluid (pulmonary edema) or your head fills with fluid (cerebral edema).

Another thing that suffers with altitude is intelligence. Paul notes that mountaineers do better at altitude if the basic activities have been done so many times that they have become instinctive. That's one reason why experience is a great asset to mountaineers. A wise mountaineer gains experience in solving problems at low altitudes where he or she can think, before going to high altitudes. Then at high altitudes the mountaineer just remembers the solution to a given problem — rather than having to create an answer from scratch.

Mountaineers consistently deal with the effects of altitude, but you don't have to be a mountaineer to find yourself facing pressures lower than those on the summit of Mt. Everest in a few seconds!

Higher than Everest

Jet liners commonly fly at altitudes of 40,000 feet, significantly higher than Mt. Everest. The airplane cabin is pressurized to the equivalent of air pressure at 6,000 or 8,000 feet. You may have noticed that the bags of potato chips handed out by the flight attendants are extra puffy. Filled at altitudes lower than 6,000 feet, the air-tight bags hold air that is at a higher pressure than the surrounding air.

In the comfort of a pressurized cabin, few people have difficulty with the pressure changes of flying — unless, of course, there's what flight attendants call a "loss of cabin pressure incident." (Other people call it "explosive decompression.") Since Paul has gone through explosive decompression training, he can tell the rest of us what to expect in such an incident.

Paul was with a bunch of fellow ROTC students sitting along

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the wall of a mockup of a military airplane cabin. Next to each participant was a sergeant wearing an oxygen mask. All participants had clipboards on which they were supposed to write their names over and over again. WHOOSH! Suddenly the air pressure in the cabin dropped to the pressure at 30,000 feet.

Air whooshed out of their mouths. In a situation like this, you should not try to hold your breath. Without the counterbalancing surrounding pressure, the pressure of the air inside your lungs could rupture your lungs and chest.

The cabin filled with mist as all of the high humidity air that came out of every orifice in their bodies expanded and cooled to form a cloud. When the cloud cleared, Paul noticed no discomfort. The human body determines the need to breathe by measuring the buildup of carbon dioxide in the blood, not by measuring the oxygen level. Paul wasn't breathing in enough oxygen to stay conscious, but he was breathing out carbon dioxide, so his body didn't register any problem. Without the slightest trace of discomfort and without any notice on his part, Paul slipped into unconsciousness.

Paul later learned that the lapsed time from explosive decompression to unconsciousness was fifteen seconds. Time enough to put on an oxygen mask if he had had one. When the pressure was restored, Paul woke up and was surprised to see that he had written his name several more times than he remembered. The memory of writing had not been stored due to the low oxygen level.

In the event of a "loss of cabin pressure incident," airplane pilots immediately put on their emergency oxygen masks and head for lower altitudes so that any passengers who do not get their oxygen masks on during the fifteen-second window of consciousness get to higher oxygen pressures quickly and live to wake up.

Boiling and Freezing

To reach pressures lower than those at 40,000 feet, we need to leave the planet Earth. We haven't walked on Mars (except in our dreams), but an exhibit at the Exploratorium mimics Martian atmospheric pressure. In the Water Freezer exhibit, visitors can watch water boil until it freezes.

In the exhibit's airtight compartment, there's a puddle of water at room temperature. The visitor starts the vacuum pump, evacuating the

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chamber. At first nothing happens — the water just sits there. Then, as the pressure drops, bubbles appear in the water and it begins to boil.

Temperature relates to how fast molecules are jiggling around. In a glass of water at room temperature, the average speed of the water molecules is greater than in a glass of water at half that temperature.

When water boils, the water molecules moving fastest are the ones that become vapor first, escaping the liquid and leaving the slower, cooler molecules behind. Boiling is a cooling process. (That may seem strange, but remember that you sweat to keep cool. Evaporating water cools you off.)

In the Water Freezer exhibit, boiling cools the water to the point where it freezes. When the pressure is about six thousandths of an atmosphere, also known as six millibars, water boils at the same temperature that it freezes.

On Mars, at one level on the surface, the atmospheric pressure is near six millibars. At elevations below this level, the pressure is higher, and liquid water can exist in an open glass without boiling. Above this level, the water in the glass will boil away.

This atmospheric level was initially used to designate "sea level" on Mars — the reference level for maps. Below sea level, liquid water could exist; above sea level, water would immediately boil away. Later investigation showed that the atmospheric pressure on Mars varies quite a bit over the course of the year. Every Martian winter, a portion of the atmosphere freezes solid as carbon dioxide snow at the Martian poles. So a reference level based on atmospheric pressure, however romantic and appealing, didn't prove to be the best choice. Newer maps of Mars use a more pedestrian reference level based on average radii of the planet.

But What About Dave?

We've been considering many things in our investigation of pressure and boiling, but we haven't forgotten Dave and his plight. When Dave goes out into the vacuum of space, he suffers explosive decompression. Having trained for this, he doesn't try to hold his breath; he allows the gas to burst from his lungs.

In cases where people have been accidentally exposed to vacuum, they lost consciousness after six to nine seconds. (One person said that he noticed fizzy bubbles of cold

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boiling water on his tongue just before he passed out.) Anyway, Dave has six to nine seconds to close the door and repressurize the air lock. If he has trained for such an eventuality so that he doesn't have to think too much, that's probably plenty of time.

But what about that problem of boiling blood? Well, it's not easy for a bubble to start to form inside the bubble-free fluids of a human body. Maybe you've noticed that when you pour a soda, most of the bubbles form on scratches and imperfections in the glass. Bubbles need a nucleation site — a place to gather. It's hard for a bubble to get started in the clean pure fluid.

If liquid reaches its boiling point but there are no sites on which bubbles can form, the liquid can become superheated — hot enough (or under low enough pressure) to boil, but temporarily free of bubbles. You may have encountered this problem when you heated water in a microwave oven. Sometimes, a cup of water can be superheated in a microwave. Such water is jiggled into an eruption of boiling when someone picks up the cup and jiggles hot water into contact with bubble nucleating sites along the walls of the cup.

The same thing happens in a human body subjected to a vacuum. Though the fluids under the skin are above the boiling temperature, it takes time for boiling to start. Seed bubbles have to form first. Accidents which have exposed people to vacuum revealed that it takes fifteen seconds or more before the flesh starts to expand away from the underlying muscles. Eventually, the body inflates like a balloon until it doubles in size. If pressure is restored, the water vapor condenses quickly and the flesh will return to normal size.

So Arthur Clarke and Stanley Kubrick got it right. As long as Dave acts fast and repressurizes the airlock in less than nine seconds, he'll be just fine.

If you want to read about Paul's adventures above 20,000 feet, check out his Web site at www.exo.net/~pauld. If you'd like to read about Pat's latest fictional adventures, visit her Web site at www.brazenhussies.net/murphy.

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One never knows what to expect from a new story by Mr. Cowdrey. Will it be science fiction or horror? Or neither? Don't expect us to spoil the surprise of this one, but we will tell you that this one is set in Mr. Cowdrey's favorite stomping grounds, the Crescent City, otherwise known as N'awlins.

Queen for a Day

By Albert E. Cowdrey

A SMALL MAN HASTENED down a corridor filled with the funk of cut flowers. His lips moved as he read the names on marble slabs. At last he found the right one and spoke to the chilly stone.

"Honeybunch," he whispered, "I couldn't get what you wanted, but I got you an absolutely beautiful copy...you in there?"

Silence. He repeated the question. More silence.

"*Oh God,*" he cried, sending echoes through the mausoleum, "*where's she gone and what's she up to*?"

"Looka that goddamn king," growled Det. Alphonse Fournet.

"You in a mood," opined his partner, Det. D. J. Tobin. DJ was black and Fournet was white, but both spoke in the downtown New Orleans accent called Yat.

Traffic cops had shifted the movable barriers on Canal Street to let them through. But the parade had ground to a halt. On the royal float the bewigged king was drinking a toast to his queen, a pale deb shivering on

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the steps of the Posh Club. Just behind, the title float — THE BIBLE, with a wind-shaken, papier mâché Adam, Eve and serpent — blocked the growler's path.

"It's that crooked lawyer, Bose," Fournet bitched on, naming a lawyer famed for his almost magical skill in getting criminals off the hook. "Fuckin' king for a fuckin' night. Fuck him."

"Boy, you in a mood. Wife on your ass again?"

Fournet did not answer, for suddenly crystal goblets splintered on the tarmac, the Queen of Kronos raced inside to get warm, and the parade jerked to life. Space opened behind Adam and Eve, DJ hit the gas and the car slid across Canal into Bourbon Street, the crowd parting as reluctantly as the Red Sea probably had for Moses. Fournet rolled down his window.

"Outa the way, assholes!" he roared.

"Boy, you *really* in a mood," said DJ, shaking his head.

Spinning the wheel, he made the car climb onto the sidewalk. He nudged aside a garish party of transvestite hookers and came to rest under a polished brass plate engraved HOTEL ELEGANZA.

In the doorway the manager, Mr. Arcady, greeted them, wringing his soft hands and saying that he had never, never had a guest murdered before.

"Foist time for everythin'," Fournet growled. "You find the body?"

"No. The bellboy, Melvin Billups, found it. He's been throwing up in the men's room ever since."

"Well, show us where it's at."

The crime scene was a rose-hued room richly furnished with reproduction antiques. Fournet bent over a woman in a peach-colored evening gown. Her face was bluer than her hair and her tongue protruded.

"Name?" he asked Arcady.

"Anna Inverness of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Can I — can I go now?"

"Yeah, scram. Wait for me in your office. And tell Melvin when he's done pukin' I wanna see him."

Fournet took out a battered notebook and a pencil, licked the point and wrote, "Crime: Homacide. Victim: Anna Invoice. Motive: Robary? Perpatrater: Unk."

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He was scribbling a description of the scene when Doc Pelf waddled in. "What, you all again?" he wheezed.

Despite his fifty-five inch waist, there never seemed to be any room inside the doc for a voice. He sank gasping to his knees and touched the corpse.

"I suppose you gonna say she was kilt by a grenade," suggested DJ, ever jolly. Pulling on latex gloves, he began to dust for prints.

"Nope. What you see is what you get. Old lady was garrotted."

"Ga-whatted?"

"Strangled with a cord. Wait a minute. See these little marks running along the line left by the ligature? Looks to me like she was strangled with a necklace."

"Wouldn't the string a broke?"

"This one didn't."

A wave of perfume caused Fournet to turn his head. Melvin Billups, a young man with a Brut addiction, had appeared at the door.

Fournet ordered him to lead the way to Arcady's office. There Melvin was happy to recount his finding of the body.

"She was gettin' dressed for the Kronos ball. She wanted a snack, so I brung her cheese and fruit. And there she was on the floor with her tongue stickin' out, like a dike with a hard on."

"Door was open?"

"Nuh uh. I knocked, got no answer, so I used my passkey."

Fournet frowned. Instead of being greenish, Melvin's face was rosy with excitement and acne. Fournet sniffed but failed to detect any taint of vomit under the Brut.

"Huh," he said, puzzled.

But a non-sick bellboy seemed to have nothing to do with the murder. He asked Arcady about the necklace.

"As a matter of fact," said the manager, "I opened the safe to get a necklace for her about three hours ago."

"What was it? Dymunz?"

"No, it was trash. But good trash, if you know what I mean."

"That really narrows it down. This town is the woild capital of junk julery."

Outside, a meat wagon had arrived to collect the body. Fournet

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watched while Mrs. Inverness, wearing a plastic bag, slid into the wagon on a steel gurney with collapsible legs. A uniformed cop from the Eighth District stopped stretching yellow tape long enough to flash Fournet a big smile.

"Hell of a end for a rich bitch," Fournet muttered, and joined DJ in their car.

"She had $120 in her purse. Here's your half," said DJ, passing bills to Fournet, who pocketed them without a word. "So whatchoo think happened to the lady?"

"The bellboy says the door was locked, so she let the killer in herself. He seen her wearing what looked like dymunz, strangled her with the necklace, pulled it off and split."

"The old broad picked up the wrong kinda stud," opined DJ. "Happens alla time."

Fournet frowned. Something was wrong with this reasonable reconstruction, but what? He stared at a drunken seaman throwing up on the sidewalk; his shipmates had gathered around him and were chanting, "Go! Go! Go!" The little tableau made him think of something...but he couldn't remember what.

"Let's get the hell outa here," Fournet said, and the car bumped over the curb, crushing beads and beer cans as it went. On Canal Street the parade had passed, leaving a huge drifting throng, every member of which was wearing thick strings of glittering beads thrown from the floats by the maskers.

Fournet sighed. *Anybody* could be the killer, strolling casually homeward, wearing the murder weapon.

Arriving late at his house on Laissez les Bons Temps Rouler Boulevard, Algiers, Fournet picked up red beans and rice and pork chops his wife Alma had left steaming over pots of water in the kitchen. He grabbed a beer and joined her in the den, where she was watching a rerun of *Bewitched*.

Alma turned, a sour expression on her wide face.

"I just hoid today Lootenant Toussaint is gonna be King of Nero. Why dint you tell me?"

"It slipped my mind."

"Yeah, right. I hadda find out from his queen in the Piggly Wiggly.

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She's that big black gal from Sex Crimes. When she tole me I said, 'I ain't never seen a queen makin' groceries before,' and she said, 'Well, you seen it now, Honey.'"

The anecdote seemed to have no point except to underline the royal status of everybody except the Fournets.

"Someday I'd kind of like to be queen of Hecate myself. Someday before I'm dead, that is. How you think I feel when the annual Queen's Luncheon comes up and I don't never get to go, hah?"

"We ain't got that kind of money. I can't knock down like some people can. Whatchoo think I'm in, Narcotics?"

"So how come that gal in Sex Crimes can do it?"

"In Sex Crimes you loin a lot of embarrassin' stuff. You can knock down in Sex Crimes. Homicide's different. You ever try to embarrass a corpse?"

Giving a hearty sniff, Alma rose and headed upstairs to bed. Fournet poured himself a triple brandy and channel-surfed until he fell asleep in the chair, a common occurrence *chez Fournet.*

Just after dawn he woke up, showered the kinks out of his body, dressed in a $150 wash 'n' wear suit, white shirt and 1958-style knit tie, and headed for the bridge-and-freeway complex called the Crescent City Connection. The sun performed its curious local feat of rising over the west bank of the Mississippi and its reflection in his rear-view mirror seared Fournet's eyeballs. A blue mist of monoxide hung over the interchange. The traffic was horrendous. A new day had begun.

HOMICIDE THROBBED with its customary madness. For weeks life there had been a zoo. Bodies turned up in vacant lots, canals, sewers and public housing. Some were chalky, some gray as clinkers, some swollen and dark like overripe eggplants. Over all hung the morning-breath smell of unfresh blood and/or the stink of decay.

Modifying Chaos was Procedure. Day by day papers fluttered into in-boxes. The computer system flickered and beeped, or went down to a chorus of curses. Fournet and DJ looked at corpses, yawned, drank coffee to stay awake, questioned witnesses, scribbled in their notebooks. From an inner office Chief of Detectives Amedee Toussaint roared at his

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underlings, demanding they keep the media off his ass. Toussaint's normal voice sounded like a bass drum, but when he roared you could hear him from Westwego to Arabi.

And then, as if the normal Mardi Gras mess wasn't sufficient, the *Times Picayune* decided to make a big deal out of Mrs. Inverness's murder. VISITOR STRANGLED AT HEIGHT OF CARNIVAL SEASON, thundered the morning headline. The result was a spate of phone calls to the mayor's office from hoteliers who swung considerable weight.

Just past noon Fournet and DJ were summoned into Toussaint's office. They found him wearing pantyhose, rouge, a sequined cape, a wig, white vinyl boots, and a plastic crown. Zircons flashed from his scepter as he practiced waving to imaginary throngs. "So whatchoo think?" he asked.

"You some kinda king," DJ, ever the politician, assured him. "I never seen nobody look no better."

"I don't know," he rumbled, dissatisfied. "The outfit's okay, but it still needs a li'l sump'm to make it sparkle."

Then he got serious. "Now lissen. The Mayor called and he's shittin' green. It's this old broad moider in the Quarter, okay?"

"Okay," mumbled his audience. Toussaint tapped his scepter against Fournet's large gut to underline his words.

"You guys find the sumbitch done it and if you can't, find some other sumbitch and stick him with it. Now you know I never said nothin' like this, but that's where the fuck it's at, okay? I mean, we're talkin' *tourism* here, for Christ sakes. Don't let the door hit you in the ass," he concluded, "on the way out."

They left him parading up and down, waving his scepter.

"We gotta charge somebody," Fournet told DJ over coffee cups in the cafeteria downstairs, "or he'll have us ridin' scooters in the Desire Project. We need like a bone to throw the dogs to."

"How about Arcady?"

"Nuh uh. Guy's loaded. We grab him and that lawyer Bose'd land on us like a thousand-pound canary."

DJ frowned deeply with the effort of thought. Then Fournet slapped the formica tabletop with a sound like a falling gavel.

"That bellboy at the hotel. He lied about pukin'."

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"Yeah, you right," said DJ, though he had no idea what Fournet was talking about.

"Let's go, then."

"Where to?"

"The hotel, asshole."

At the Eleganza a shock awaited them. When they cornered Mr. Arcady, he told them that Melvin hadn't come to work that day because he had been arrested.

"He was *arrested*?"

"Yes," said Arcady. "You know, Detective, I always imagined that Melvin was just acne on the hoof. But he gets around."

"He was *arrested*?" Fournet repeated. "For killin' Invoice?"

"No, the other one," said Arcady. "Didn't you hear? His girlfriend was strangled early this morning."

"Whoops!" said DJ.

Fournet was staring. "Where you hoid this at, smart guy?"

"Channel Four news."

"You mean he's the right one after all?"

"You some kinda detective," said DJ, slapping his partner on the back. "You had the right guy and dint even know it."

After making a call from Arcady's office, Fournet and DJ headed back to midcity and police headquarters. There a clerk dug out a cassette with Melvin's just-completed interrogation, and provided them a machine to play it on.

"I couldna done nothin' bad to my baby," the bellboy's nasal voice sobbed. "I love her, for Chrissake. That's why I took that dymun necklace to give her."

"Oh, yeah?" growled the voice of the interrogator, Det. Schlechter. "Now that's innerestin', Mel. Tell me all about that necklace. You gonna feel a lot better after you do. Also, if I hafta jump up and down on you, you gonna feel a lot woise."

After more badgering, Melvin admitted taking the necklace from Mrs. Inverness's body and hiding it in a toilet tank in a men's room off the Eleganza's lobby. Schlechter then booked him with Felony Theft, pending further investigation of the two murders.

Fournet and DJ left headquarters and crossed a narrow street to

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Central Lockup. From outside, the building looked like a large gray animal shelter. Inside, the smells of disinfectant, vile food and sour bodies confirmed the image.

Fournet and DJ passed through the metal detectors, waved at a couple of acquaintances, and headed for the Criminal Sheriff's office. Aided by a deputy, they extracted Melvin from the cell where he was awaiting arraignment and took him to an interrogation room decorated with peeling, gray-green paint.

In an ill-fitting orange jumpsuit, Melvin was a long way from the natty bellboy of the Eleganza Hotel. Instead of Brut, he smelled of jail and misery. He had been crying for hours, and now began again as he insisted that he hadn't killed nobody.

"Sure you did, Mel," said Fournet in a kindly tone. "You killed Miz Invoice to get that necklace for your girlfriend."

"No, no, no," Melvin wept.

"You tell the truth, we can get you life," wheedled DJ. "Otherwise, zappo — the lethal injection," and he mimed a needle jab into his left forearm. Melvin winced.

"Be nice to the kid," said Fournet. "He probably didn't know what he was doin'. Right, Mel?"

"Nuh uh. I never done nothin' like that before. Oh, I'm so glad Mama's dead and in heaven."

"See, DJ? Mel's a good kid, he wants to tell us the truth. Don't you, Mel?"

"Yes sir," sobbed Melvin.

Fournet slid a pad of yellow paper and a ballpoint pen to DJ. "Write down, 'I want to tell the truth. I didn't know what I was doin'.' What'd you do, Mel, pull on the necklace?"

"What?"

"Did you pull on the necklace?"

"Oh, yeah. Yeah. It was wound so tight...."

"Write this, DJ. 'The necklace was wound tight around Miz Invoice's neck and I pulled hard upon it.'"

An hour later, the two detectives dropped into Toussaint's in-box a brief signed statement in which Melvin appeared to admit that he had panicked and killed Mrs. Inverness while robbing her. Then they went downstairs for more coffee.

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"There, that oughta take the heat off," said Fournet as they stirred plastic cups with plastic spoons.

"I admired how you got Melvin to confess," said DJ warmly.

"It's like you got a rat in a corner," Fournet told him. "He goes left, you go left. He goes right, you go right. I just wish," he added, "that we could find that necklace. That'd really make Toussaint sit up and take notice."

"We'll find it. You some kinda detective. I loin sump'm new from watchin' you every day."

Suddenly Fournet jerked to his feet and roared, "SCHLECHTER! OVER HERE!"

A squarish man resembling an ingot of pig iron in a permanently unpressed suit made his way across the cafeteria to their table and dropped into an empty chair.

"Where y'at?" he asked, surveying Fournet and DJ with the illusionless eyes of a stray tomcat. He began to dunk a big sugar-crusted Danish into his coffee.

"Look, tell me about that necklace Billups's girlfriend got kilt with," Fournet said.

"Well, that's what her mama said. Me, I never seen no such of a thing. It was a ligature strangulation all right, but there wasn't no cord or nothin' in the vissinty of the victim."

"Goddawg," exclaimed DJ, "but that necklace gets around! Where's it at now? Whatchoo think, pardner?"

After deep reflection, Fournet answered, "I think I'll have me a Danish. That one Schlechter's got looks good and gooey."

Back in Homicide, Fournet and DJ were summoned to Toussaint's office and congratulated on their quick work in obtaining a semi-plausible confession.

"Not too bad," rumbled the great man. "I mean it's bullshit, but it's enough to where we can charge him with moider, and that'll kind of cool things off, y'unnerstand what I'm sayin'?"

Toussaint was back in civvies, except for his crown, which he'd forgotten to remove.

"Sometimes I almost think you guys ain't the total assholes you most

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generally act like. Look, try'n get this Melvin character to admit he done the young broad, too. Be nice if we could kill two boids, like."

Conferring with DJ over beers at Ya Mama's Bar & Grill on Tulane Avenue, Fournet decided to check the crime scene before trying to get Melvin to implicate himself a second time.

"Remember this, DJ," he said solemnly. "*It don't never hoit to look at evidence, provided you keep in mind that it ain't nothin' but evidence.*"

Schlechter's report revealed that Melvin's girlfriend had been named Baby C. Motley. When Fournet and DJ arrived at the paintless cottage on Grand Trianon Street where she had lived, they found it overflowing with people bringing food and comfort to her mother.

"You watch the car," Fournet ordered, after viewing the rundown neighborhood. "Last time I had one snatched from under me, Toussaint was on my back for a month."

Mrs. Motley, an ample woman in pink plastic curlers and a spectacular orange kimono, was weeping and eating lasagna in the kitchen. The volume of sound was earsplitting. Forcing his way through the mob, Fournet was offered a chair at the table by Baby's brother, Ptn. Lester Motley, an Eighth District uniformed cop. "Detective Fournet," he said warmly.

Fournet frowned. He had a vague feeling he'd seen this scrubbed young face before.

"Do I know you?"

"Yes, sir, from the Eleganza Hotel. I know the names of every detective from Lootenant Toussaint on down. Now shut up, y'all!" Lester shouted. "And don't listen in, you hear? This ossifer's gonna talk to Mama like he has to, awright?"

Everybody fell back, creating a zone of relative quiet in which Fournet addressed the grieving mother.

"Baby was your daughter, Miz Motley?"

"Yeah, and she was so precious. I can't tell ya how sweet and dawlin' she was. She was never sick a day in her life until she met that boy. Then, right off, stuff begun to happen. Foist she got a yeast infection, then a urinary, and then she got killed with that necklace he give her. *Gawd*, I hate Melvin Billups. It's like he's coist or sump'm."

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"Was Melvin with her when she died?"

"Nobody was with her at all. That's what I can't unnerstand. Baby always got up real oily for her job cuttin' meat at Swagman Giant Supermarket. She was all alone in her room gettin' dressed when I hoid her fall down and start threshin' around. And I never seen my...Baby...alive no more."

Her large face swelled dangerously and she dissolved into tears. Women rushed up, pressing wads of Kleenex upon her.

Fournet excused himself and rose from the table. Lester pulled him into a corner and handed him a drink that proved to be vodka and orange juice.

"Detective," he said respectfully, "I hope you don't mind me sayin' I gotta great ambition to, like, follow in your footsteps."

Fournet sipped the drink.

"Well, see can you help me out with this case. Your Mama says your sister was kilt with a necklace Billups give her. Was he around here? And where's the necklace?"

Lester shook his head.

"Baby had it last night. She really liked it; it was the foist nice thing Melvin ever give her. He went home about nine-thoity and never come back this mornin'. Mama was in bed in the front room and I was in the back and Baby's room is in between us."

His clean pink face was a study in puzzlement. "I just don't see how anybody coulda got at her. I just don't see it."

Fournet swallowed the last of his drink.

"You have you a great career in law enforcement," he said, and wrestled his way out of the house.

DJ was leaning on the car blowing smoke rings that drifted upward and dispersed against a cloudless February sky. A school band was marching by, headed toward some parade or other. Their brass instruments made noises like a herd of rutting gnus. Plump girls dressed entirely in purple sequins twirled batons and backsides. The sweaty bandsmen followed, bug-eyed and tootling.

"So, did Melvin do it?" DJ asked.

"He couldna. And neither could nobody else. Baby was like in a sandwich between her mama and her brother, who's a cop. The crime's physically impossible."

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They stared at each other, baffled.

"Somethin' fuckin' weird is goin' on," DJ opined. "My grammaw, she runs a spiritual choich on St. Roch. It's kind of like Catlick voodoo. She been prayin' to the Voigin and sacrificin' a buncha chickens to get me promoted. We could get her to ask the spirits."

But Fournet wasn't yet ready to turn to witchcraft.

"Foist we try some more policin'," he decided. "If that don't woik, voodoo is next."

THAT EVENING LIFE on Laissez les Bons Temps Rouler Boulevard was much the same as before, except that Alma hadn't turned the stove on under the pots of water and Fournet's dinner had congealed into a mass resembling rubble masonry. Stolidly, he ate it anyway while she berated him because she wasn't royalty.

"It's Mardi Gras and everybody in Noo Awlyunz is king or queen of sump'm," she pointed out.

"Them kings and queens ain't nothing but a bunch of assholes dressed up in fake dymunz, fake beards, fake everythin'."

"I swear to Jesus, you got no more ambition than a terlet."

After she went to bed, he poured himself a quadruple brandy and channel-surfed. The parade of Nero was being broadcast on Channel 4, but he flipped past it with a muttered curse. Finally he found a Stooge-a-thon on Channel 78 and settled down to enjoy himself. He was chuckling over the way Curly fell into a bandsaw when a news bulletin interrupted the show. A tragic fatality had occurred during the parade of Nero.

Hastily Fournet flipped back to Channel 4. Garishly lighted by flares and popping flashes, an immense crowd sluggishly gave way to an ambulance. Klaxon horns brayed and sirens whooped and whistled. A newsman shouted into a microphone, giving details.

Fournet listened, muttered "Key-rice," downed his brandy, hit the power button on his clicker, and headed up to bed.

"Anythin' happenin'?" asked his drowsy wife from a deep nest of bedclothes. She lay under a cloud of subtle odors rising from the salves and creams she put on at night.

"You might say."

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After an irritating silence, Alma said, "So? What happened?"

"Toussaint fell offa his float and broke his neck is what."

Alma raised herself in bed like a surfacing manatee and stared at him, round-eyed.

"Nooooooooo shit," she whispered.

"You could say that, too," he said, climbing into bed in his XXL jockey shorts.

"If you was to become chief of detectives, we could afford me bein' queen of Hecate next year."

"I ain't gonna get Toussaint's job. The superintendent'll want somebody young and black and I ain't neither one."

"You solve that moider and you might get it."

"Fat chance. That necklace business is from outer space."

"Either you get me the money to be queen or you ain't never gonna have another peaceful hour as long as you live."

"Bitch!"

"Bastard!"

"Cunt!"

"Prick!"

Fournet got very little sleep that night. Neither did Alma, but she made up for it after he left for work.

At headquarters next morning, Fournet slouched wearily through pale corridors where a greasy brown streak ran along the walls at shoulder height and banged into a pasteboard office full of plastic-laminate-over-fiberboard furniture.

DJ was waiting for him, giving dislocating yawns and sipping a paper cup of machine-made coffee.

"Doc Pelf wants you should call him."

"What about?"

DJ shrugged. Fournet put in the call and when Pelf's wheezy voice replied, he asked, "Whassamatta, Doc?"

"The proper phrase is, 'What's up, Doc?'" said Pelf jocularly. "Hey. I guess you heard about your boss dying?"

"Yeah. He fell offa the float. So?"

"You want to guess how he died?"

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"By hittin' his head on the pavement."

"Nope. By ligature strangulation. The hyoid bone was broken. He didn't die because he fell off, he fell off because he was being garrotted. Want to guess what with?"

"Four feet of coaxial cable?" Fournet suggested, hopefully. Pelf chuckled.

"Yeah, right," he said. "The necklace is back in circulation."

Fournet struggled to clear his head, which felt as if it was packed with plaster.

"Who was on the float with him?"

"Nobody except the Royal Cupbearer, who is eight years old and the mayor's nephew."

"Then it's impossible too. Like the other one."

He rang off and, pausing only long enough to tell DJ the news, headed for the Men's Toilet. There he selected a comfortable stall, sat down and put a roll of paper behind his head. Soothed by the murmur of water, ignoring the echoing voices and random explosive flushes, he fell asleep and snoozed for fifty-five minutes, awaking refreshed.

DJ was putting on his holster when he returned to the office.

"More meat," he said succinctly.

The address of the new victim lay west of the Quarter in the crime-haunted streets of Tremé. In a ratty old building layered with ochre paint, a shaky circular staircase led up to a cheap apartment. Guarding the door was Patrolman Lester Motley, Eighth District.

"Hey, Detective," he greeted Fournet breezily. "You and me only go to the best moiders, right?"

"Yeah, right," grunted Fournet.

The victim's apartment was a symphony of green-dyed ostrich plumes, flea market versions of African masks, moth-eaten potpourri, jars filled with dried pampas grass, and a six-foot papier-mâché rabbit from a Little Theater version of *Harvey*, attired in a sequined jockstrap.

The owner of all these riches was long and bony, bald-headed and boa-wrapped, lying separated from a red fright wig in the middle of the floor. Apparently he was a fanatic parade-goer, for aluminum doubloons from a dozen krewes were scattered everywhere. One doubloon attracted Fournet's eye as he bent over the body: stamped on its face was a fat drunk in a toga

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and the word *Nero*. The drag queen had been hustling the crowd during last night's parade.

Instantly Fournet was on his knees, pulling plastic beads, scarlet wig, and purple feather boa away from the victim's neck.

DJ asked, "Whatchoo find?" but Fournet paid no attention. He was staring at the now-familiar deep crimson mark of a ligature lined with tiny bruises and minuscule bleeding cuts from the beads of a necklace.

"Shit fire," seemed insufficient, and he could think of nothing else to say. He rose to his feet, staring at DJ, hardly hearing the shuffle and weighty creaking of the stair outside as Doc Pelf made his slow way upward.

Then he was squeezing past the Doc without a word of greeting, moving with a kind of elephantine speed to the head of the stairs, where he grabbed Patrolman Motley by the arm.

"Lester," he breathed, "you know what happens to a young cop goes to jail?"

Lester stared at him.

"What happens is, he winds up with a butt looks like the back end of a Thanksgivin' toikey. Now gimme that goddamn necklace. Now! Give it to me."

Slowly Lester pulled a glittering object from his pocket and put it into Fournet's hand.

"It wasn't doin' Baby no more good when I took it the foist time," he apologized. "I hoid Toussaint was lookin' for nice stuff for his costume and I really, really wanna be a detective."

"So why you took it this time, then?"

"The fag musta stole it off Toussaint's body, right? I mean, he was a *thief*. I was, uh, gonna toin it in."

"Yeah, right," said Fournet, and rejoined DJ and Doc Pelf.

DJ was saying cheerfully, "I guess you gonna say the victim choked on a hairball, eh, Doc?"

"No such luck. It was the you-know-what again."

Fournet slipped into the bathroom, which featured a quadruped bathtub full of tubes and bottles of makeup and a cracked, clouded full-length mirror. He pushed the door to, and extracted the necklace from his pocket.

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He was thinking of Arcady's description. Trash, but good trash. Good rhinestones, some dabbled with blood. No catch to break and a strong, tough cord. A garrotter's dream.

Experimentally he twisted the necklace around one fat hand, then suddenly tore it off and flung it into the bathtub. He stared in terror, first at the necklace, then at himself in the mirror.

"It couldn'ta," he whispered.

But it had. He'd felt it tighten on his hand.

Fournet slipped a ballpoint pen out of his shirt pocket, bent and lifted the necklace. He searched the litter in the bathtub, found a mostly empty face-powder box, dropped the necklace inside, fitted the lid, and slipped it into his coat pocket.

He emerged from the bathroom with mind made up. He said to DJ, "Where at you said your grammaw has that choich?"

"By St. Roch."

"Then that's where we goin'. Detectin' by itself ain't gonna woik in this case. We gotta call in the spirits."

The Divine Word Outreach Ministry Spiritual Church occupied a former chicken 'n' ribs outlet on a dusty stretch of St. Roch Avenue among a clutter of shotgun cottages.

DJ's grandmother had suede-colored skin and wrinkles like a mudflat baked by the sun. Dressed in jeans and T-shirt, she was pushing aside wooden and metal folding chairs to sweep the church floor and singing softly to herself, "Got my hand in the hand of the man from Galilee."

DJ asked her where she was at, got a vigorous hug and kiss in return, and introduced Fournet. "So what I can do you for?" she wanted to know. Fournet pulled out the box and exposed the necklace.

"This thing has kilt four people that I know of. I don't mean it was used to kill 'em, I mean it kilt 'em all by itself. Also, it tried to grab my hand when I was lookin' at it."

She frowned. "Prob'ly a snake spirit got into it."

"How that happens?"

"Who knows? The woild be fulla spirits and they got to go somewheres. Desiré, Honey, you know where everything is at, so you find your friend a beer while I gets ready to mess with this coise."

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Fournet was stunned to learn that DJ's first name was Desiré. He'd had a vague idea it was Derrick, an impression DJ had done nothing to dispel. In a small, neat kitchen to the rear of the church they drank Turbodog beers, while Fournet explained how he'd come into possession of the necklace.

DJ was impressed. "How you knew that cop had taken it?"

"Who else? The foist time it was Melvin and the thoid time it was the drag queen, but who was the only guy around coulda taken it the second and fourth times? We was watchin' each other, and the necklace was gone before Doc Pelf arrived."

"Yeah, I see what you mean. You some kinda detective."

"Thanks."

DJ's grandmother returned, wearing purple robes and carrying a freshly cut branch of sago palm. She explained that ever since the first Palm Sunday in Jerusalem, palms had kept the memory of the Lord Jesus riding over them, and were blest.

"On the other hand, that tree they made the cross from, you know? It was coist, and so it died out. They ain't no trees like that no more. Desiré, look in the fridge, Honey, and bring me the blue fruit jar with the holy water in it."

She first led them in the Lord's Prayer, then dipped the frond into the holy water and extended it toward Fournet. He draped the necklace over the palm and watched — in a condition beyond disbelief — as the beads twisted back and forth, glittering.

"Yeah, sump'm mean be in here," said the priestess. She dipped the rhinestones into the jar and the necklace twisted more violently.

"Now, you all join in, you hear?" she said. "When I say sump'm, you say 'Amen!' And say it loud!"

She drew a deep breath and addressed the necklace. "Because thou hast done this thing, thou art coist among all cattle and beasts!"

"AMEN!" they roared.

"Upon thy belly shalt thou go!"

"AMEN!"

"Doit shalt thou eat all the days of thy life!"

"AMEN!"

"Come out, soipent! Come out, soipent!"

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The exorcism went on for twenty minutes, until all three of them were running with sweat. The necklace continued to be agitated, but that was all.

"This here is a serious spirit," she acknowledged, wiping her brow. "This ain't no spirit just kind of casually crawled into these beads. Look to me like it's the woik of a witch."

"So what I do?" asked Fournet.

"Find out who owned it before it started killin'. That'll be the witch. You'll find a offerin' jar at the door, and Desiré, don't you and your friend just walk past it, neither. If it was just you I wouldn't charge nothin', but when I woik for the po-leece, I gotta right to be paid."

Fournet and DJ deposited ten dollars of Mrs. Inverness's money in a tall bell jar and returned to their car, where the radio was beeping steadily. Fournet answered.

"Yeah?"

"We just gotta call in," squawked the voice at the other end. "A citizen says she sold a piece of evidence to Miz Whatever — Inver — Inven — "

"Invoice," snapped Fournet. "Smatta, can'tcha read? What'd she sell the old broad?"

"A necklace. You innerested?"

FROM A MOIST flagstone sidewalk next door to a gargoyle shop, Fournet and DJ spent a minute contemplating the show window of Mardi Gras Memories, Marie LaMarie, Prop.

The clutter made the drag queen's apartment look neat. Engraved invitations, scepters dripping rhinestones, jeweled and feathered masks, caped sequined robes, a Mardi Gras Indian costume so complex the patterns bewildered the eye.

"They got 'em some of the real stuff," Fournet acknowledged, and pushed through the door.

A smiling, rotund Cajun woman approached, saying, "Bonjour." She had sun-tanned skin, shining black hair and dark, moist eyes like an intelligent ox.

"Where y'at?" said Fournet, showing his ID. "Look to me like you gotta great place here."

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"Tanks. Me, I'm Marie LaMarie. Glad you like it. Ten year ago when I move from Opelousas wit' my hoozbond I figure, well, if I must live in the cité, I go whole hog. So I open up Mardi Gras Memories."

"What took you so long to call the po-leece about this necklace, Miz LaMarie?"

"I don' like crime reports, all 'at bloody stuff. I switch off sound when it comes on TV. But today somebody start talkin' 'bout the murder, and *toute de suite* — " She snapped her fingers. "Like 'at I reelize."

He showed her the necklace. She nodded.

"Yeah, 'at's it. An ole lady buy it. She love 'at necklace. I tole her it was favor for a queen, and 'at was true."

"Where you got it at, Miz LaMarie?"

"Estate sale. Come in my office and I check the records."

She led them on a winding path through heaps of musty costumes. Plaster heads modeled quarter-face masks, half-face, whole face, whole head. Antique lithographs portrayed floats covered with jewels, insects, fairies, demons.

"I also gotta X-rated section in back," she said. "You gentlemen wanna to go in, it's okay, but I'm too embarrass to go wit' you."

Her office held a glass cabinet filled with favors from balls — glittering pins, cups, bracelets and, yes, necklaces. Fournet and DJ waited while she flipped through a shoebox full of 5x8 cards.

"Here. Owner died and her stuff got sole off. Necklace, it had a real frayed cord. Me and my hoozbond, we like to fish, so I restrung it on good strong fishin' leader, 200-pound test. After I sole it I gotta letter from a lawyer who offer to buy it back."

She dug into a second shoebox stuffed with bills and letters and extracted an envelope of thick cream-laid paper.

"Yes," she said, handing over the letter. "Guy name Bose. It was heirloom that got sole by mistake. I never answer him, so he phone me today. When I tole him it was gone, he sound kind of desperate, you know? He ask who buy it, I say a lady name Miz Inverness, and he say: Oh Jesus, not 'at woman who got kill? So I knew I must call cops."

She smiled, sentimentally. "He sound so sad, Mr. Bose. He must reelly love his wife, wanna get back her necklace so bad. I hope my hoozbond feel 'at way about me when I'm dead."

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But Fournet had an idea Bose's emotion was something other than love.

The offices of Bose, Partridge, & Lemon occupied the top eleven floors of a skyscraper called the Place St. Georges. Fournet and DJ had to take three elevators to get to the eyrie where the senior partners dwelt.

The secretary of A.L.T. Bose III was an imposing woman whose helmet of blonde hair had apparently been turned in a machine shop.

"Whom shall I announce?"

"Detective Fournet and Detective Tobin, NOPD."

"May I inquire what your visit is in regard to?"

"Official business."

"Can you be more specific?"

"No."

"Please have a seat."

As she was vanishing into Bose's office, Fournet asked DJ loudly, "Just whom the fuck she thinks she is?"

Bose sat at a long, expensive mahogany table. His morocco leather chair just missed throne dimensions. A tall, ornate window opened on a bird's-eye view of the Mississippi River, of wharves and warehouses, gray streets and glimmering canals, all fading into a distant bluish horizon.

Despite the signs of prosperity and success, Bose did not look happy. His eyes had sunk into nests of dark bags and smudges and his pale, thin hands trembled like a victim of Parkinson's. The first word that came to Fournet's mind was "haunted."

"What can I do for you, Officers?" he asked in a weak, distant voice. His intonations were Garden District — a slight weary drawl, like a man on the verge of sleep.

Fournet pulled up an ornate chair, sat down and gestured for DJ to do the same. He extracted the face-powder box from his pocket and shook the necklace out on the table. Then he sat back and watched Bose's eyes grow big.

"You reckanize this?"

"Um yes. Um yes, I do. It belonged to my wife, Aloysia. It was, um, sold by mistake."

He sighed deeply.

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"A great...big...mistake. She'd left specific instructions she was to be buried in the regalia she wore in 1963 as Queen of Medea. She was born, well, *downtown* — by the *Industrial Canal*," he whispered, as if still incredulous over his mesalliance — "and that one night of glory was incredibly meaningful to her. That's Aloysia," he added, pointing.

Fournet and DJ turned and stared at a portrait in oils of a woman in royal robes, glittering crown, scepter, and an all-too-familiar necklace. Her face was a clock-stopper and her small black eyes had the beady, fixed intensity of a king — or in this case, queen — cobra.

DJ leaned over and whispered in Fournet's ear, "*That ain't no snake in that necklace. It's the witch her own self.*"

"Jesus X. Christ," Fournet muttered. "So that's how this guy got so goddamn rich. Whenever he went to trial, she put grisgris on the other side." Turning back to Bose, he asked, "Where's she at?"

"Evermore Mausoleum. At least, her remains are. Her spirit may be elsewhere. It would be nice," he said wistfully, "if...if I could take that necklace to her, uh, resting place. If I don't, who knows what she might do next?"

His voice trembled.

"Sorry," said Fournet, returning the necklace to its box and the box to his pocket. "This here's evidence. It might be released in a year or two, but even then it goes to Miz Invoice's heirs. I just hope it don't kill none of them like it did her, the drag queen, the lady butcher and the chief of detectives."

"Oh God!" cried Bose, plunging his face into his old spotty hands. Then, slowly, he looked up.

"But," he said.

"But what?"

"I happen — just happen — to have a copy of the necklace in my possession. You could turn that in."

He gave Fournet a significant look.

"It's a *perfect* copy. You'd be amazed, Officer, if you saw how much it cost me. Why, just look at this," he said, extracting from the drawer of his desk/table a checkbook in a long black tooled leather cover, stamped with his name in gold.

"Just look at what I had to pay," he said, handing the checkbook to

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Fournet, whose eye, possibly by accident, fell not on the amount paid to Goldmark Fine Jewelers but rather on Bose's current balance, which was more than merely impressive.

"If only," mourned Bose's elegant, die-away accent, "there was some way that we — 'we' meaning, for the purposes of this transaction, you and I and your, uh, partner — could reach a meeting of minds."

Fournet looked at DJ. DJ looked at Fournet.

"It may be," said Fournet slowly, "that we can."

"So how's your home life these days?" asked DJ, when he bumped into Fournet, both of them wearing rented tuxes, at the Hecate ball. All around them, dancing couples masked as beasts and beauties bounced and gyrated like a multicolored sea to the sounds of the New Leviathan Oriental Foxtrot Orchestra.

A year had passed and Mardi Gras had returned, as it tended to do. In answer to DJ's question Fournet gestured at the enormous, glittering figure of Alma on her royal throne, center stage at the Municipal Auditorium.

"When she's happy, everybody's happy," he said. "When she ain't, fuhgeddit. Right now she's happy. So how you like your new job?"

The Superintendent of Police had selected DJ to fill Toussaint's job, citing his success in solving the Inverness murder. Alma had wanted Fournet to file a reverse-discrimination suit, but he argued that it was better to keep DJ as a friend and anyway, you couldn't fight the spirits.

"It's hard," DJ answered soberly. "But I try to remember all the stuff you loined me. And Grammaw's helpin' me in her own way."

"She's some lady. You know, DJ, there's good witches, there's bad witches, and there's — " he gazed again at Alma — "just plain witches. By the way, whatever happened to Melvin Billups?"

"Judge threw out the moider charge. Lucky for me, it was after I was promoted. Melvin got two years for theft, less time soived."

"Fuckin' judges are all soft on crime."

Later that evening, Fournet danced with the queen. Alma flashed and twinkled in so many zircons that he wished he had dark glasses on. Her girdled waist felt like an oil drum and leading her was like steering a drug-smuggler's overloaded boat through choppy seas. But love flooded out of her like an aura.

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"Sweetheart," she whispered, "this here's the best night I had since April 1, 1970, when you laid me the foist time in the Rubicon Motel on Airline Drive."

"Yeah, well I'm still the same guy done it way back then," he assured her gallantly. They leaned toward each other would have kissed, except that his gut and her bosom in combination held them apart.

So the dancers whirled on until the sun rose over the west bank of the river, and it was time for gleaming floats to turn into pumpkins, and kings and queens into housewives and cops and lawyers and veeps of middling concerns. Time also for all of them to begin dreaming up future fantasies to make tolerable the vile grind of existence.

Later that morning, in the Evermore Mausoleum, A.L.T. Bose presented a fresh red rose in a bud vase to Aloysia's marble slab.

"Honeybunch," he whispered, "Honeybunch...you in there?"

Out of the depths came a dark, whispery, sibilant sound like rough scales rustling over stones.

"*Ssso, whatchoo think*?" Aloysia asked.

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Unlike most of the contributors to this celestial issue, Jack O'Connell is probably not a familiar name to most readers. His novels Box 9, Wireless, *and* The Skin Palace *haven't appeared in the science fiction sections of stores—like Jonathan Carroll, he's a writer whose work fits uneasily into contemporary genre categories. His latest novel,* Word Made Flesh, *attracted some more attention in the sf/fantasy field and it will be interesting to see where his next book takes us.*

At the moment, Mr. O'Connell is editing an "All Noir" issue of the journal Paradoxa. *He recently collaborated on an interview with Richard Matheson for the same magazine's "Fifties Fiction" issue, and you might detect a bit of RM's influence on this tale. You might also miss your stop if you're reading this story on the train—and if you do, who knows where that might lead you...?*

Legerdemain

(In memory of Robert Cormier)

By Jack O'Connell

DEAR F:

I am, primarily, a reader. No, let's be factual — I am *only* a reader. In all other things, I have been, let's confess, an abject failure. As husband, father, son, brother, friend, lover, I have been a consistent disappointment. In the last letter you called me a "writer" and I reared back upon reading the word.

I am a correspondent. No more and no less. And I come from a time when this was known to be a different avocation from "writing." While both writer and correspondent wish to make contact, the purpose of that contact differs with each role. With each state of being.

But today, on this one and only occasion, I do have a story to tell. Whether or not you believe the story is not my concern. I ask only that you follow it to the conclusion and try to remain open-minded and attentive. At such a late date, is this too much to ask?

We must start the story with a disclaimer. We must offer up my motivations for what will be, very likely, my final letter. Yes, the worst has been confirmed. The third and most vigorous course of chemotherapy has failed. In some perverse and utterly characteristic way, it is a relief. No

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more plastic bags of useless fluids leaking into my veins day and night. No more thumbing through dense (and badly written) journals for the latest news about acute myelocytic leukemia. I checked myself out of St. John the Divine last night over the outrage of a physician young enough to be my grandson. It was as if my choice to die far from the sterility of the hospital were an affront to his newly minted degree. The young have not read enough, my friend.

But look at whom I aim my windy summations. For years now you have read all of my discursive epistles and I need for you to know, now more than ever, how much this has meant to me. No one could guess the nature of our connection. And soon there will be only one primary source available to the historians. The blood on this page fell from my nose. Not an encouraging sign, but I won't tear up the sheet and start again. Time is simply too precious.

So now that you know the context, I will pass on to you all that I have to bequeath. The last tale and the best. Librarians and book clerks are not known for the enormity of the estates they leave behind. But, if they can identify the appropriate heirs, there is usually a legacy to be passed down, an antique or two of some value. Take this story with my thanks and my blessing. Perhaps one day you will tell it in my memory.

In my youth, there was a time when I was obsessed with playing cards. At the de Sale School I was, by far, the best card player. This is no great boast, however. I came of age too late, at a time when boys had, by and large, abandoned the love of a long card game. The art of the deal and the play and the bluff was no longer inculcated in the young. After the first few times I cleaned out the rare poker enthusiasts on campus, no one wanted to go to the green felt with me. I was left to a dozen variations of solitaire and, more importantly, manipulation.

I believe at some point I have written of my boyhood enthrallment with sleight-of-hand magic. My interest began with a young fan's appreciation for the Masters — Arthur Lloyd, Herbert Brooks, the great Archie Tear. In due course I began to emulate my idols and found that I had a). the long, tapered fingers that are made for such a skill and b). the infinite patience and the love of repetition and the satisfaction of my own company that allows for the kind of endless practice that the skill requires in order to be elevated into art. I trained compulsively, to the detriment

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of my studies and my friendships, but before long I could handle a Greek Shuffle or a Mongolian Crimp with the nonchalance of a professional. I could palm and riffle, spring and jog in my sleep. I had two Svengali decks, one of which had been made in London by Elmsley himself (or so the salesman told me). I amazed my dormitory mates with a slew of vintage tricks, all of which were new to these rubes. They sat in the hallway late into the night, sipping their tonics and trying not to blink, their backs rigid against the ancient horsehair plaster as I led them like lemmings through the O'Henry and the Gemini, through Liar Liar and the King's Robbery.

I won't go into the details of my downfall at the school. Suffice it to say that I fell prey to the magician's oldest temptation. The audience's adulation and frustration were not enough for me. Soon, I went for their wallets. They were all young enough to love wagering on illusion. And I was young enough to think I could strip them of daddy's allowance without repercussion. That I spent the money on an Oriental stripper deck with its own enamel case only further annoyed the dean of discipline and it was upon receipt of his letter that my sister, my legal guardian, summoned me home to the Capital.

So, that morning, boarding the train out of Quinsigamond, I thought I would calm myself with hours of one-handed shuffling, making Jacks vanish from sight, as I pondered ways to explain and excuse my expulsion.

I was riding the old Portland-Columbia line — this was just a few years before it went bust. My train, the Seaboard Star, once the showcase of a more tasteful era, was showing evidence of extreme fatigue. The stained glass in the solarium was cracked and the brass moldings in the dining car were tarnished beyond any hope of a future gleam. These signs of obsolescence combined with the disgrace of my dismissal and my fear of my sister's anger to produce in me a premier case of the blues. So, as I found my seat in the last economy coach (car 29 — I've never forgotten), I set at once to my favorite cure-all. I put my duffel between my legs and began to rummage for a deck. And I came up empty.

Shocked, I pulled open the mouth of the bag until the seams were ready to burst and searched again. My hand grabbed blindly, fondling sweatshirts and dirty socks, but I soon knew the truth. There were no cards to be found. In my haste to disappear from the campus, I had forgotten to pack even a single deck. I can't convey how unsettling this

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discovery was. I always kept a deck within reach. The cards had become a kind of talisman for me, a calming instrument, unconsciously handled in the way others finger prayer beads or pill bottles.

It's true, I could have marched down to the club car and purchased a new pack. But the dean had ordered me to reimburse my marks with interest and I was suddenly experiencing some severe economic difficulties. I had only enough money for either a skimpy lunch or one of the train's horribly flimsy souvenir decks — the ones that sport a line drawing of a locomotive. The trip was a ten-hour ride. Though I knew that my stomach would carry the day, still, my decision, though logical, was an insult to what I saw as my calling. And so, though I knew it was futile, I allowed myself some angry rummaging before I resigned myself to my fate.

That was when Klingman approached me. Let me take a moment to describe the man's face as that first glimpse remains with me, just as clear, to this day. I know that I overestimated his age, a common mistake for a schoolboy. At that time, age had only two demographic categories: Youth, someone such as myself, an aspiring magician with all the time needed to learn the conjuring arts. And lack-of-youth, which meant irrelevant and musty and unintelligible.

Klingman was, I would now guess, no more than fifty years old. His skin, however, was already giving in to the cruelties of gravity if not sunlight (he was not an outdoorsman and, today, I might speculate that he was anemic). He was short and round, a pear-shaped lump of dough. He had bushy gray eyebrows, purple caverns below the eyes. There was a long-faded scar on the bottom of his chin. Sea-green eyes and a badly cut monk's crown of hair. There were liver spots speckling his dome. He needed a shave and a conscientious barber would have trimmed the nose hair without waiting to be asked. He wore wire-rimmed glasses of the old variety, round lenses with either a rust-colored or industrial silver frame.

His clothes were an indignity, I thought at that time, when I was as stylish as I was arrogant. But Klingman was surely unaware of this humiliation. I can see the worn, dark suit that smelled like camphor and was many fashion-seasons out of date. A yellowed handkerchief was pushed up one sleeve. I know he wore his faded white shirt open at the neck and there was a ribbed undershirt beneath.

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He said to me, "Did you lose something?" in a tone too concerned and friendly. Too informal, as if he were an uncle I'd known since birth.

I looked at him without responding, one hand still thrust in my duffel, though I already knew there was no hope of retrieving any cards.

Klingman stood in the aisle staring at me as I stared back. A woman turned sideways and shimmied past him. She was carrying a sleeping baby. I remember the infant was dressed in white lace.

"Because," he said, "I could lend you one of mine." And with that he positioned himself and lowered his bulk into the seat next to mine. Trust me when I tell you he was not a naturally coordinated man.

My mood went from disappointed to suspicious with the speed only an adolescent can summon. Klingman pulled into his lap an oversized valise made, I swear to you, of some sort of imitation red leather. It was cracked and torn and he opened it delicately.

"Nothing worse," he said, "than being caught on a long train ride without your book."

"I was looking," I said, delivering the words with what I hoped was the right combination of contempt and apathy, "for a deck of cards."

"You are a card player?" he asked and I waited a beat for emphasis before blowing a heavy gust of air out my nose and giving my head the tiniest shake. This greasy bumpkin was the last thing I needed. I was about to speed toward my sister's fury for three days of debate about my attitude and my future.

"My father was a card player," he said. "Do you know the game My Aunt, Your Aunt?"

This brought me up short. I did, in fact, know the game fairly well. But, understand, it had already fallen through the cracks of popular entertainment. It was a complicated affair, requiring both a good memory and an actor's instincts. Some real money could be made during a night with the Aunts. But I'd never before met anyone who was an informed player.

I sat in my seat and gave him a smile. I said, "You wouldn't have a deck of cards in there?" indicating his bag.

At this he laughed.

"Cards?" he said in a put-on voice and made a little show of opening the valise and bringing his head down to its mouth. "No, no cards in here,"

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as if I were a child in need of amusement. At that moment I thought him less the hick and more likely an Old Mavis, as we called them at de Sale.

He rooted in the valise and I thought for a second he was mocking me, imitating my search through the duffel. After a moment, he pulled free two books, both paperbacks. He held one in each hand and hefted them a bit as if trying to guess the weight of each. As he did this, he pushed out his bottom lip, which gave him a moronic, unevolved look. The books appeared old and second-hand. The spines were both broken and peeled in so many places that you could no longer read the titles.

"A difficult decision," he muttered, it seemed, to himself. "Always, a tricky choice."

He let his head fall back against the fibrous white paper that protected the headrest and closed his eyes, then his left arm jerked sideways and presented me with one of the books.

Today, it interests me that I tried to decline the gift. I shook my head but his eyes were still closed, so I was forced to say, "No thanks."

"It's a long trip," he said with an annoying, sing-song delivery. It didn't occur to me to ask how he supposed he knew where I was headed. It wasn't an express train. There were a dozen or more stops before we would arrive at the Capital.

"I'm not much of a reader," I said.

"That," as his eyes opened, "is a shame. But not a tragedy. Do you know why?"

I didn't want to have a conversation but I didn't know how to make this clear without being rude. And so I set out immediately to be rude. I pushed my seat back in a reclining position, turned away from the man and made as if to nap.

Of course he continued talking.

"Because this is something you can change. This is a condition you can alter at once. Without too much difficulty."

I felt the book tap my arm, rolled forward and looked at him.

"Hey, mister," I said, "give me a break."

But as I said the words, I surprised myself and took the book from him. I turned it over in my hands and studied the cover. To say that it was striking would give the wrong impression, call up, I think, notions of color and flash. This was not at all the case, more the opposite I would say, but

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the design did intrigue me and made me want to discover what was inside.

The title of the novel was *Refugee*, the word written in large, black type. Many years later, it occurred to me to attempt to replicate the presentation of the title on the page. I spent weeks with a felt pen and a sketchpad, but, as you know, I am no artist and when I took my rendering to a designer acquaintance, she offered several possibilities as to the typography. I looked up all of her speculations and the one that seemed to come closest to my memory of the title on the page was known as "Urban Remington." It approximates an old typewriter style and upon seeing this I recalled that part of the design was an uneven distribution of the ink, some letters darker than others, but all in the utilitarian blockiness of a manual typewriter dating from mid-century.

I had an instantaneous attraction to the illustration below the title. I can no longer recall whether it was a photograph or an artist's rendering, but if the latter, it was done in an extreme style of photo-realism. It was precise and detailed. Perhaps I did not know at first glance if it were photo or painting. It had something of a sepia quality to it, though it was surely in color, mostly muted browns and blues.

What shall I describe for you first? It would be simple to say the cover featured a young man on a highway. But while technically accurate, I fear this would instill precisely the wrong impression. The "young man" is more an adolescent forced into an early maturity. Yet, how can I say that I knew this on first glance since the figure was depicted in the distance and his back was to the reader's eye? The "highway" was actually an older, two-lane road, nothing like the interstate monsters of our own age. There was no traffic. There were no reflective-green road signs. No gas stations. No halogen lamps rising into the clouds. The landscape was pastoral — the road was framed by forests of bare trees, stark with the autumn season. The young traveler carried a sailor's tote. He was attired as a working man, in blue jeans, a coat of leather or canvas, boots. He approached a covered bridge, partly shrouded in mist, set in the distance, in the upper right-side of the cover, just below the last "e" of the title.

Now, the first oddity that should have been evident was the absence of an author's name anywhere on the cover. But I failed to realize this until I finished reading the novel.

After studying the cover, I attempted to hand the book back to its

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owner, who was busy trying to cram his valise under his seat. When he finally sat back and saw the extended book, he waved it away, saying, "Trust me, you'll like it."

"I told you," I countered, "I'm not a reader. I don't want it."

He smiled and let his head give a series of fast, patriarchal nods.

"Yes," he said, "I heard you. You do not read. You do not like books. I hear it quite often."

But still he would not take the book from me. Instead he pulled in a phlegmy breath and said, "You keep the book. No need to read it if you don't want. But just in case you change your mind."

"I'm not going to change my mind," I said, more loudly than I intended.

"You give it to me at the end of the trip."

"I don't — " I began, but he held a finger up to his mouth and made a shushing sound as if trying to quiet an infant.

I was caught so completely off-guard that I canceled the end of my protest and he said, "You know, if I remember correctly, there's a wonderful card playing chapter someplace near the middle."

I stared at the man and decided to walk away. I got out of my seat and saved it with my duffel, tucked the book into my back pocket and walked toward the club car, fuming. By this time, the train was ready to pull out of the local station and I'll confess that the knowledge that I was leaving de Sale for the last time inflamed my regret and my sense of shame. I had experienced as many happy as sad days on the hill and since my parents' accident, it was the closet thing I had to a home. The thought of living with my sister was as unappealing to me as it was to her husband. So, as I wormed my way into the overheated club car, the weight of the unknown future came to me in the form of a subtle panic.

When a seat opened near the window, I raced for it against someone's dog-faced grandmother and claimed it without any remorse. The bitter righteousness of the orphan and all. The table was littered with the remains of the previous occupant's breakfast, a small lake of spilled coffee and powdered sugar. I mopped and brushed with a napkin and looked out the window at the decrepit, ash-covered landscape of mills and row houses that had come to represent New England to me.

We picked up speed slowly and the train occasionally lurched, but for

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the most part there was a steady, nap-inducing sway to the motion that produced in me a kind of low-grade trance, a state perpetually on the border of sleep, but never crossing fully into that territory. When the waiter finally arrived, he had to grunt to signal his presence. I ordered a cherry soda and he immediately launched into a bored, well rehearsed explanation that the tables were reserved for "full-meal dining only." I asked for a corn muffin to go with the soda and the man gave me a dismissive look and moved off toward the galley.

Everyone else in the car seemed in high spirits, dressed up for travel and looking forward to reuniting with a distant clan. The sound of all this anticipated happiness made me more fearful than angry and I suddenly wished I had taken one of the interstate bus lines with their bad ventilation and horrific toilets.

I leaned back into the booth and felt Klingman's book press against my coccyx. And then came, depending on your point of view, the moment of my redemption or my damnation.

I'm sorry to be so melodramatic, my confrere. But I know, beyond any possibility of doubt or confusion, that this moment, this simple action, the basic kinetics of my arm reaching behind my back and extracting the book, that *this* was the moment when my life jumped tracks and veered wildly in a new direction.

I went beneath that picture of the wandering young man and started to read his story. Within a paragraph, the train began to vanish and the world of the refugee began to assert itself into my consciousness with such power and clarity that I was helpless in its presence.

At some point, I assume, I paid for and ate my muffin. But I did so without thought or taste. At some point, the club car must have emptied of its breakfast customers and filled with a lunch crowd, disposed of the sandwich eaters and swelled with the supper shift. For reasons I still do not understand all these years later, no one bothered me. No one disturbed the universe of my reading. Not even my surly breakfast waiter.

You want, at this point, some sense of the novel. I'm hesitant to even attempt such a gift. In the end, it's a cheat, isn't it? At best, I'd be offering the shadow of the experience. Which is to say, I'd be offering you nothing. Less than nothing. You could, of course, try to track down the novel and read it yourself. Let me save you the effort. You'll never find it. I know this

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as surely as I know my own name. And even if you could locate a copy, your experience of the book could never be my experience. Have you never heard the saying, *the reader creates his own book*?

But for the sake of my story, let me write that the novel was a *Bildungsroman*. A coming of age tale. The protagonist was a boy my own age and, if you can believe it, also an orphan. The title referred to his sense of unbelonging and chronic displacement. The boy wandered the country, chapter to chapter, region to region. At one point, he even rode the rails, as I was doing. The hero worked odd jobs along the road. He met fascinating characters and had all manner of adventures.

Am I making the novel sound like a lark, a series of lighthearted episodes? It was anything but. A dark tale, there was a sense of the ominous and the morose on every page. More than any plot-driven danger that befell the boy, there was at the heart of the narrative an aura of foreboding evoked by the prose itself. And in the end, the hero remained the refugee of the title, still unsettled, still unembraced. After all those pages, the boy continued to live as a wanderer and stranger in the land of his birth.

I finished the book two stops before we pulled into the Capital. The sun had gone down. My backside was in a state of advanced paralysis. I hadn't eaten since breakfast and my bladder was on the verge of rupture.

I want to write this as precisely as I am capable because it will inform your sense of my entire story: when I finished that book, I felt as if I had been remade. I felt as if I had been changed into another person somehow. As if my consciousness had not been simply opened up, but redesigned and redirected, refocused, trained to think, to imagine, in an entirely new manner.

I closed the book and tried to stand and stumbled on my sleeping legs. I used the table tops as crutches and made my way to the rest room where I urinated for some record-breaking span of time. I splashed my face and neck with water. And then, instinctively, I ran to find Klingman.

My duffel was on my seat where I had left it, but Klingman was not in the adjoining chair. I looked up and down the aisles. No Klingman. I thought of searching the Seaboard Star, car by car, from coach to first class. But before I could begin, the train began to move again. And as it pulled out of the station, I saw the old man outside, seated on a wooden bench

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on the boarding platform. He was staring at me, smiling. He brought one hand away from the book he was reading and gave me a single, slow motion wave. I moved into my seat and brought my face to the window and watched him recede and grow smaller. I stood there, one knee resting on my seat, my arm above my head braced against the window, until Klingman disappeared from my sight. And in the instant that he vanished, I was overcome with a sense of what I now swear was pure grief.

I have come to know grief all too well and too often in my life. As anyone my age has. Grief is what age insists on teaching us. And the sensation of utter loss I experienced in that train car, watching a stranger fade into the distance, was akin to the dispossession and the cold sorrow I had felt when my parents were killed on an icy highway in Manitoba.

I think I might have dissolved into tears had I not felt the hand on my shoulder. I jumped and turned to find my breakfast waiter smiling at me. He removed his hand but I couldn't bring myself to ask what he wanted. He leaned forward and whispered, "Klingman says, 'You're welcome.'"

I cringe again as I write this because on the page it may read a presumptuous statement. But I have never doubted that the message contained anything but genuine warmth and good wishes.

The waiter moved on and left my car. I sank into my seat and held the book in my lap as if it were a fragile pet. For the rest of my trip I looked from the book cover to the countryside passing my window. My mind was empty and exhausted and my entire body was chilled. I knew, sensed, that something had happened to me but I could not begin to understand what it was.

When we arrived at the Capital, I pushed the book into my duffel and buttoned my coat. I was the last to exit the train. My sister and her husband were waiting for me. For some reason, they were both dressed formally, as if on their way to an opera. They had the same tired, dour look on their faces. I knew they wanted some immediate groveling — enough so that I'd embarrass myself without making a scene. And honestly, I would have complied but I was tired enough to collapse.

I followed them to the parking garage and climbed into the back of their sedan for the drive to the country house where we were to spend the holiday. Under the guise of weary concern, my sister lectured me the entire way, grounding all of her many opinions regarding my character in

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the disappointment and disgrace that our mercifully dead parents would be feeling if they could see how badly I'd turned out. My brother-in-law played Greek chorus, warning of the ravages the future would hold should I fail to "turn things around."

Somehow, I managed to stay awake and take all of the berating in a silence that I hoped passed for contrition. When we arrived at the house, I passed, politely, on the dinner that Sis had kept warm in the oven. I apologized one last time for my mistakes, promised we would talk in the morning and climbed upstairs to one of the guestrooms.

I closed and locked my door, threw the duffel on the loveseat and opened it, intending to climb into bed with the book. Not to read it, mind you — my eyes and my brain were beyond reading at this point. No, I simply wanted to hold it close to me, the way a child might hold a stuffed bear. But the book was not in my bag. I emptied all the contents, all of my possessions, and sorted through each item. Then I resorted over and over again until it was clear there was no book to be found. You can imagine how frantic I was.

I made myself settle down enough to think logically and decided that the book must have fallen out in the car on the ride home. My brother-in-law was an erratic driver at best and my sister's non-stop scolding had only degraded what little skill he possessed. We had taken some sharp corners getting onto and off of the expressway. My duffel had been sitting in the rear passenger footwell and had, most likely, toppled during one of those turns. The book, which had been sitting atop the rest of my gear, likely fell out of the bag and was now resting beneath the driver's seat.

I managed to wait until I heard my hosts retire for the night, then I made my way downstairs and out through the laundry room into the attached garage. The sedan was unlocked and I performed an elaborate, let us say obsessive search, but there was no sign of the book.

I returned to the guestroom and went through the bag again and again and came up empty each time. I lay down on the bed, fully clothed, and tried to think of the other possibilities. I'd either dropped the novel on the train, in the station, or in the parking garage. Tomorrow, I decided, I would find a way to return to the station and comb the area. Perhaps locate a lost and found office. If nothing turned up, I could inquire with the train line — I still had my ticket stub with all the pertinent information. The worst

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case scenario, I imagined, would involve purchasing a fresh copy of the novel at a bookstore. Though I didn't have an author's name, I had the title and that, I thought, should be sufficient. This was a distasteful option, however. I very much wanted the copy that Klingman had given me. I wanted, needed, that specific book. That *object*.

But with a plan of action decided, I attempted to sleep. Of course, it was futile. By 3 A.M., I was consumed with a level of anxiety I had never known. Even my expulsion hearing paled in comparison to the worry and nervous tension I experienced that night. I paced the floor. I tried to exhaust myself with sit-ups and push-ups. I raided the medicine cabinet and swallowed a handful of aspirins. And I went downstairs and rifled my sister's library drawers until I found an incomplete Pinochle deck. (That they called this book-free room a "library" has always amused me.) I took the deck upstairs and spent an hour running through my various routines, making cards disappear and reappear and trade places. And for the first time since I'd initiated myself in the brotherhood of monty, the cards failed to bring me any solace.

Can you imagine, old friend, how desperate I felt in this moment? It was the kind of realization that reroutes the intestines and bites into the heart. What I did next should inform you of my state of mind that night. As my anxiety began to trammel my reason, I started to repack my duffel. When I was done, I slipped downstairs, found the key to my sister's convertible in her pocketbook and borrowed her car. My brother-in-law, up until the day he died, was incensed with my use of the word "borrowed." But as I backed out of their driveway, I had every intention of returning before morning.

I tried to retrace the route to the Capital and got lost several times. Finally, I secured directions at a highway gas station. It was only after I'd parked in the train station garage that I realized I had no money for the exit fee.

I searched the garage and the areas of the station that I'd passed through. There was no trace of the book. The lost and found office was closed but I pestered a ticket clerk until she opened the door and let me inspect every bin. I inquired about a search of the train I'd arrived on, the Seaboard Star, and was informed that it had just been thoroughly cleaned before its imminent departure and that no books had been discovered.

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An analyst I knew briefly once theorized that my actions that night were the result of the accumulated traumas I'd been experiencing since the death of my mother and father. That my parents' demise and my banishment to de Sale and my expulsion from the school all coalesced and exploded inside of me. And that the force of that explosion propelled me back onto the train.

The truth is that as I sat on a bench in the cold of the National Station, I felt all my panic and doubt slip away from me and I became as focused as a young Houdini. And at the heart of this utter calmness I found the certainty, the absolute conviction, that if I did not recover the Klingman copy of *Refugee*, I would die. This confession, I would guess, leads you to believe that I was not in my right mind when I decided to re-board the Seaboard Star and ride north once again, in search of the book and, perhaps, in search of Klingman.

But you must trust me, F, when I write that I was as sane as I have ever been. Sane enough to approach every conscious soul in the station and proffer my father's vintage Hamilton "Mason"-model wristwatch for the price of a train ticket. This was self-inflicted robbery, but it took me until the last boarding call before I found an elderly porter who knew the value of what I offered. He paid me what I'd asked and threw in the cost of breakfast and lunch.

For hours, I walked back and forth through all the cars of the north-bound Seaboard Star, looking under every seat, checking every rest room, inquiring of every uniformed hand. But there was no trace of my lost paperback.

And so I tried, with a surprising degree of success, to re-create the book in my head. I closed my eyes and slouched down in my chair, huddled into myself and let the rocking of the car lull me into a kind of lucid dreaming, a recollection of the story that was, if not a perfect re-creation, even more interesting for its discrepancies. Where my imagination insisted on rewriting the author, it managed, to my delight, to retain the overall mood and tone and, if you can stand it, theme of the book.

I'd had only enough cash to get to Manchaug, a one-horse valley town in the farmlands a few hours west of Quinsigamond. My exact plans as I got off the train have faded over time, but I believe I hoped to find a ride into the city and to look up all the Klingmans in the phone directory.

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Before I left the depot, however, something made me stop at the ticket counter and inquire if there were any bookstores nearby.

Remember that this was when people still retained a degree of literacy *and* civility. The clerk explained that Pittsfield was my best bet for selection, but there was a local antiquarian shop about ten miles down Route 4.

"Of course," the clerk added as I turned away, "they'll both be closed for the holiday."

I turned back to him and he smiled and said, "I doubt anyone will be open on Thanksgiving."

The word hit me like a rubber bullet for two reasons. Yes, I felt some guilt over my flight from my sister and the worry I must be have caused her. But, as cavalier and selfish as it will sound, more than any guilt was the fear that I faced a delay in locating *Refugee* or Klingman.

I left the station and walked out onto the road, trying to think. If I turned right, I'd be headed in the direction of Quinsigamond and de Sale and the possibility of food and shelter from a pitying headmaster. The possibility, as well, of finding Klingman. He had, after all, like me, boarded the train at Gomper's Station.

But as you have already guessed, my friend, I turned left. And for the first, but certainly not the last time in my life, I began to hitchhike. You have to understand, I was obsessed. However lofty it might sound in retrospect, I can only tell you that at the time it felt as if I were on a kind of quest. And, as in the case of most quests, neither fatigue nor reason could dissuade me.

There was little traffic and I decided that it would be best to walk as I hitched. Route 4 was a lazy two-laner that had recently been made obsolete by the interstate. And by the time I had my thumb out, most travelers had already arrived at their destinations and were sampling the cider and cheese. I'm sure I looked suspicious to the few cars and trucks that did roll by, what with my slept-in clothes and uncombed hair and vintage seaman's duffel large enough to hold a small body.

But I didn't much mind. The day was brisk, but I was wearing my father's old Navy pea coat. And I had time to think, once again, about the book. This time, however, I let myself extrapolate freely, taking the refugee into sideline adventures that his author had never considered.

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About two hours later, I rounded a bend in the road, looked out on a classic New England covered bridge and fell to my knees in near faint. The sensation of collapse vanished almost as quickly as it had come. But I sat on my duffel breathing through the aftershock of it. My legs and arms had gone numb and, simultaneously, a chill had coursed through my body like a current.

When I collected myself, I attributed the spell to hunger and sleeplessness and the general upsetting of the past week. I picked myself up and continued across the bridge and on the other side I saw a red-shingle cabin with a sign on the roof that announced

SCHEHEREZADE'S
RARE AND USED BOOKS

There was a porch fronting the house and on the porch sat wheelbarrows filled with books.

I confess that I ran across the road without looking, dropped my duffel in a pile of leaves and leapt up the three stairs to the porch. I began pawing through the offerings. It was a real mishmash — hardcovers and paperbacks, fiction and non-fiction and textbooks, atlases and magazines and even postcards. I went through it all like a man panning for gold. But I think I knew, as I looked, that I would not find *Refugee*.

When I'd exhausted the offerings and confirmed my suspicion, I sat down on the stairs to decide my next move. And soon after that I heard a bell ring. I turned around to see a man standing behind me. He would have been my first choice to play a farmer in the local production of *Oklahoma*. He was gaunt and tall and serious looking, craggy-faced and with a head of thin steely hair that he combed straight back over his bulging dome of a skull.

"Can I help you?" he said in a tone that implied I'd better have a good reason for sitting on his steps and I'd better deliver it fast.

"I was looking for a book," was all I could think to say.

He squinted and said, "We're closed. It's Thanksgiving."

"I understand," I said and stood up. "Sorry to bother you."

I got as far as the shoulder of the road when he yelled, "What book were you looking for?"

I turned back and yelled the title. He was the kind of man who wore

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his thinking on his face. I watched his eyes glaze a little in concentration as he scratched at his chest through his flannel shirt.

"I don't know it," he yelled. "Who's the author?"

I took a step back toward him and said, "I have no idea."

This seemed to surprise him and, after looking back into the shop, he said, "Come on in here for a minute."

His name was Albert Southard. And he lived like a monk in a back room of the store. In the years since we met, I've often wondered what became of him. And I've wondered what became of that unlikely store in the middle of nowhere. Inside, it proved bigger than it had looked from the road. It is, in my memory, a haven of cozy warmth, a honeycomb of small shelf-lined rooms, each one fitted with an easy chair or a sofa, all of them draped with quilts and comforters and pillows. Of course, there were books everywhere, spilling off the shelves, forming pyramids in the middle of the corridors. I could see that a sense of order was not the shop's chief virtue.

Mr. Southard offered me a seat in front of his desk. On top of the desk, in the center of his blotter, steamed a TV dinner of turkey and mashed potatoes. Southard took his glasses from his shirt pocket and asked me to tell him about this book that I seemed to need so desperately. I gave the same details that I've given to you. (Over time, that description of the book became a kind of prayer, repeated so often that I could say it in my sleep.) At the end of my recitation, Southard shook his head. He began to walk to his piles of reference volumes, asking, over his shoulder, where I found my original copy of the novel. I started my story and when I mentioned Klingman's name, Albert Southard stopped in his tracks.

He returned to the desk and said, "Now that you mention it, I think I do know the book." It was a rare volume, he said. The print run had been minimal. It could be a costly investment. What was the maximum I'd be willing to pay?

The possibility that I couldn't afford the book had not occurred to me. Mr. Southard must have seen the crestfallen look on my face because before I could respond, he added, "But we're getting ahead of ourselves. First we'll see if we can locate this *Refugee*."

He told me to make myself at home, to feel free to browse the store while he made some calls.

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I looked down at the aluminum tray organizing his Thanksgiving feast and said, "I don't want to interrupt your meal."

He seemed confused for a second, then he said, "Have you eaten?"

I admitted I had not. He said he had another Swanson's in the freezer. Would I like to join him? I hadn't had a bite since finishing a cheese sandwich somewhere in Smyrna. I thanked him for the hospitality and he went off to pop a tray into his toaster oven.

I did as he advised, let myself ramble through the maze of the store, running my finger along rows of spines, silently reciting titles and author's names as if they were train stops along an extended journey.

Sometime later Mr. Southard found me in the rear of the place, sitting on the floor with a tower of books at my knee.

"Dinner's served," he said and I looked up to see him holding my TV dinner in a oven-mitted hand.

We ate on opposite sides of the desk. I devoured every scrap. Washed it all down with warm ginger ale.

"I've got some leads," he said to me as we ate.

He spoke, quite knowledgeably, and, at times, quite humorously, about various used bookstores all over the country and their often eccentric proprietors. And by the time we got to our cherry cobbler desserts, he surprised me by asking, "By any chance are you looking for a place to stay?"

I had imagined I would be sleeping in a train station, waiting until I got so cold and hungry that I had no choice but to call my sister.

"It's no shame to need a place to stay," Southard said. "Come here."

I got up and followed him back to the front of the shop. He put my duffel on the largest couch and said, "It's not four star, but it's warm and the sofa is comfortable."

Before I could reply, before I could argue or thank him, he slipped into his overcoat and said, "I have to visit my sister and her family. I'll be back in the morning. We'll have some breakfast and talk some more about this book of yours." Then he was out the door and I was locked inside.

You're thinking what I thought: What kind of a man leaves a complete stranger alone in his home overnight? Let me tell you something. Southard was part of a tribe that is larger than you might expect.

Can you begin to imagine the flood of doubt and fear and, yes,

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excitement and hope I experienced that night? Alone in an unknown town, without a dime to my name, I felt as if I were living someone else's life, as if a mistake had been made and my mundane existence had been swapped for one of adventure and freedom and danger and absolute chance.

Is it any surprise that I could not sleep that evening? I made some coffee. I ate the pear and the jar of nuts that I found on the desk. And I carried several armfuls of books, more books than I could read in a lifetime, to the couch and spent a delightful if hallucinatory night sampling all manner of story.

Over hot oatmeal and bananas the next morning, Mr. Southard offered me a job. I knew, even at that tender age, that this was nothing but charity. That he had no need for an employee. But I was not in any position to be proud. I took the job and stayed for three months, saving up my money and learning the basics of the book trade. And more than this. I began that morning a dialogue that would continue the rest of my days. I entered into an exchange about books and writers and stories and what they can mean to a life.

Every other week or so, Southard would make a vague comment about a lead he had on *Refugee*. But nothing ever came of them.

When I finally left Scheherezade's with the intention of moving, in general, westward, Albert Southard gave me the name of a bookstore in Milwaukee that had purportedly sold a copy of *Refugee* last year. He also mentioned that the proprietor might have work for me.

And so I became a traveler, a traveling reader, staying briefly in some places, much longer in others. And devouring books as I went. My general purpose remained the search for my elusive paperback and the man who had given it to me. But as time passed, it became a passive quest. It was not that I gave up looking so much as I came to understand, to feel, that it would take years to conclude my search.

I worked in libraries and bookshops mostly, referred from one owner or manager to another. But I can also claim employment as night watchman, parking lot attendant and house sitter. All jobs that allowed me to read for long, uninterrupted hours.

I attempted to settle down once, in the exact middle of my life. It was an emotional time and I let a rare bout of loneliness influence me. I tried,

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very hard, please believe me, to make a family. But I was not suited to the role of patriarch and I hurt too many people for too many years. It was not that I did not love my wife and the twins. Never that. I loved them to my full capacity and to this day I ache with regret at the way I failed them. But I was driven, compelled — just as I'd been compelled to jump on the Seaboard Star and flee the Capital all those years ago — to live a different life than the one they required and deserved.

Is it any wonder that so many religious traditions insist their priests remain celibate? It is a setting apart, is it not? It is a way to claim them as acolytes of another way, another tradition, separate from the satisfactions of the domestic world.

I'm trying to say that on the day Klingman gave me that book, he claimed me for another way of life, initiated me into something wondrous and ruined me for the joys of the grounded.

I'm saying that I followed the only road open to me. I continued my wandering, a kind of tin pan asceticism. I came to see most of my native land and much of the rest of the world. I traveled as often as possible by train because I found that, though I never attained the depth of intensity I'd known with *Refugee*, the rails always provided a heightened reading experience.

It was early in the travels that I began to understand the phenomenon I titled, at some point, "the seizure," the numbing faint and chill that would overcome me from time to time, just as it had on Route 4 when I first glimpsed that covered bridge on my way to Sheherezade's.

The second occurrence happened in Peru, Kansas, where I was working in a small shop called The Bookworm. I had not been long in the Prairie State but I'd already assisted a customer in securing a rare first edition of a C. Gus French novel. The collector, a pharmaceutical salesman who passed through our region every other month, was so thrilled that he invited me to join him for a night on the town. His cheer was so genuine that I accepted, not knowing that a night on the town meant sitting in on a longstanding game of draw poker in a Road King motel room. The other players were friendly but wary of the youngster. I soon replaced their wariness with surprise and then, annoyance, when, by 10 P.M., I was smirking behind most of the chips on the table.

My experience at de Sale had taught me nothing, however, and I let

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my early good fortune make me cocky. Also, there was liquor present and while I only nursed a beer or two, I was new to the charms of alcohol and perhaps my play grew more sloppy than usual. Whatever the reason, my good fortune faded rapidly and by the end of the game I was busted. It was as I got up from the table and walked into the bathroom that the seizure hit me. I managed to close the door behind me and steady myself against the sink. There was a cold sensation throughout my body, particularly along my joints. This was followed by a near faint, which, in turn, was followed by the most vivid and powerful feeling of déjà vu I had ever known.

Only it became apparent to me in seconds that it wasn't déjà vu at all. It was an episode from the novel, from *Refugee*. On the Seaboard Star, I had read an almost-exact description of everything that took place in that motel room. Everything that had happened to the novel's protagonist — the arrival in Kansas, the invitation to a private card game, the flush of early success and the subsequent loss of all the winnings — had been replayed in my life. I *was* the protagonist.

It happened again two years later in East Texas where I was robbed at gunpoint while exiting a movie theater.

It happened in Denio, Nevada, where I was arrested for vagrancy and through a series of miscommunications and bad luck, ended up serving thirty days of county jail time.

And in Castile, New York, where I met a belly dancer named Glynnis and ended up in a hot air balloon celebrating her birthday.

And in Lowell, Massachusetts, where I met my wife-to-be for the first time as she served up a sausage omelet at the Paradise Diner.

In some strange way, for reasons that to this day I do not understand, my life was foretold in a forgotten, spine-cracked paperback novel titled *Refugee*.

I last experienced a seizure on the day that we met, my friend, on that train to the Capital. (I've never told you, but I was heading to see my sister who was living in a nursing home not far from the National Station. One last visit to apologize and say good-bye.)

I want to apologize to you as well. I know I appeared overbearing during our initial meeting, but when you reach my age you will see that sometimes one must dispense with manners when time is in short supply. And I hope my little gift made up for my rudeness.

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No need to track me down to say, "thank you." Giving the right book to the right person is a joy I've long treasured. Beyond this, it is my duty.

Which is why it's no surprise that this is where I find myself in the end. On a train. Rattling and swaying, out of the world and into another story. But perhaps it will surprise you to learn that when I boarded this particular train and made my way to the last car (still traveling in the economy coach, of course), and located my seat, I found a large and shabby passenger in the adjoining chair.

Klingman was reading *Refugee*. He'd left another, more slender volume on my seat. He lifted it, with one hand, without breaking off from his reading. And I took it from him as I squeezed into my place without a word. It has been over an hour now and still we have not spoken. I've stolen a few glimpses and he looks the same as he did when I first met him. When my nose began to bleed at the start of this letter, he pulled his yellow handkerchief from his sleeve and offered it to me. It smelled like old paper.

There is so much that I want to ask him but I don't want to interrupt his joy, the beauty and wholeness of his moments enveloped in the story of my life. My guess is that he is anxious for me to put down this pen and pick up my last book.

I'll trust the porter to mail this for me.

In case you're wondering, the volume currently in my lap appears to be more short story than novel. There is no author's name on the cover. And this time there is no title. Only a picture, a faded cover illustration of an old man sitting in a train car reading a book whose cover features an old man sitting in a train car reading a book.

I have no idea where this engine is headed or if I'll have time to finish the tale. I have no interest in knowing. The countryside passing me now looks like no land I've seen before. But then, my eyes are not what they once were. What is? Even my hands, once so strong and agile, capable of tricks that could make you distrust yourself, are, today, gnarled and stiff. By the time I finish turning the last page, they'll be good for nothing.

You, on the other hand, have much to do. Places to go, as they say, and people to see. I'm sentimental enough to ask that you think of me from time to time. Hopefully, in a favorable light. I ask that you try to

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understand why I did what I did. Why I chose you out of the world and initiated you. Why I made you into a reader.

I ask, if possible, that you forgive me, my friend. Please know that I wish you all the best, despite any evidence to the contrary.

And now, if you'll excuse me, I have some reading to catch up on.

Sincerely, ☙

COMING ATTRACTIONS

Thomas M. Disch, Harlan Ellison, Maureen F. McHugh, Robert Sheckley, Walter Mosley, Kate Wilhelm, and R. Garcia y Robertson. These are just a few of the writers who will be bringing us new stories in the months ahead.

Our December issue will feature "Little Brother," an interesting take on the future of the American judicial system. Its author, Walter Mosley, is best known for his mystery novels like *Devil in a Blue Dress*, but in recent years Mr. Mosley has turned to science fiction to examine issues of life today and tomorrow.

Also on tap next month is a dark tale by a master, namely Thomas M. Disch. "The Shadow" is a piece that was inspired by the fire that burned Mr. Disch out of his New York apartment last year, and the story too rages.

We don't want to say too much about the next few issues, but here are some bits you might find tantalizing:

- Maureen McHugh addresses the issue of memory loss in "Presence."
- Dale Bailey shares with us a remarkably prescient and frightening examination of Presidential elections.
- Jeffrey Ford explores the issue of "Creation" and David Prill reveals dating secrets from an unlikely source.
- M. Rickert puts new spins on some classic myths.

All in all, it looks as though the rest of 2001 and the year 2002 will be very good indeed. Give a gift subscription and you can be sure you'll have a grateful friend throughout the year.

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CURIOSITIES

THE MARVELLOUS LAND OF SNERGS, BY E. A. WYKE-SMITH (1927)

IMAGINE a creature about half the size of a normal person, who lives with others like him in "a place set apart" from men. These creatures are long-lived, very fond of parties and feasts, and rarely have adventures, but this one gets lost in a woods of twisted trees. His name is two syllables, oddly ending with *-bo*. Can you guess the book, and the name of the creature?

If you said *The Hobbit* by J. R. R. Tolkien, with Bilbo Baggins, the half-high hobbit, as the main character, you'd be wrong, but not entirely offbase. For *The Hobbit* is a direct descendent of the book in question, which is *The Marvellous Land of Snergs* by E. A. Wyke-Smith, published in 1927. J. R. R. Tolkien bought this volume for his own children, and they loved the book, begging their father for more stories about Snergs, these half-high creatures with names like Gorbo. Tolkien responded with his story of Bilbo the hobbit.

Edward Augustine Wyke-Smith (1871-1935) was a British mining engineer who traveled all around the world. He published eight novels, four for adults and four for children. *Snergs* was his last book. His first, *Bill of the Bustingforths* (1921) is, like *Snergs*, a delightful anti-fairy tale. One of his adult novels, *The Second Chance* (1923), is science fiction, concerning an old man rejuvenated to his youth by a drug made from ape glands. Wyke-Smith's wry style is a delight for both children and adults.

—Douglas A. Anderson

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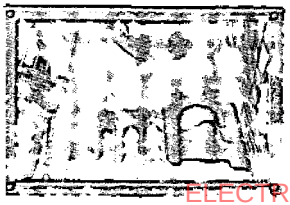

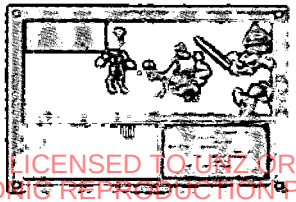

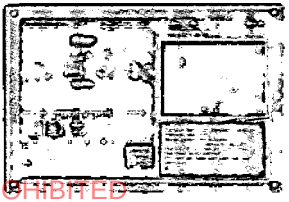

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